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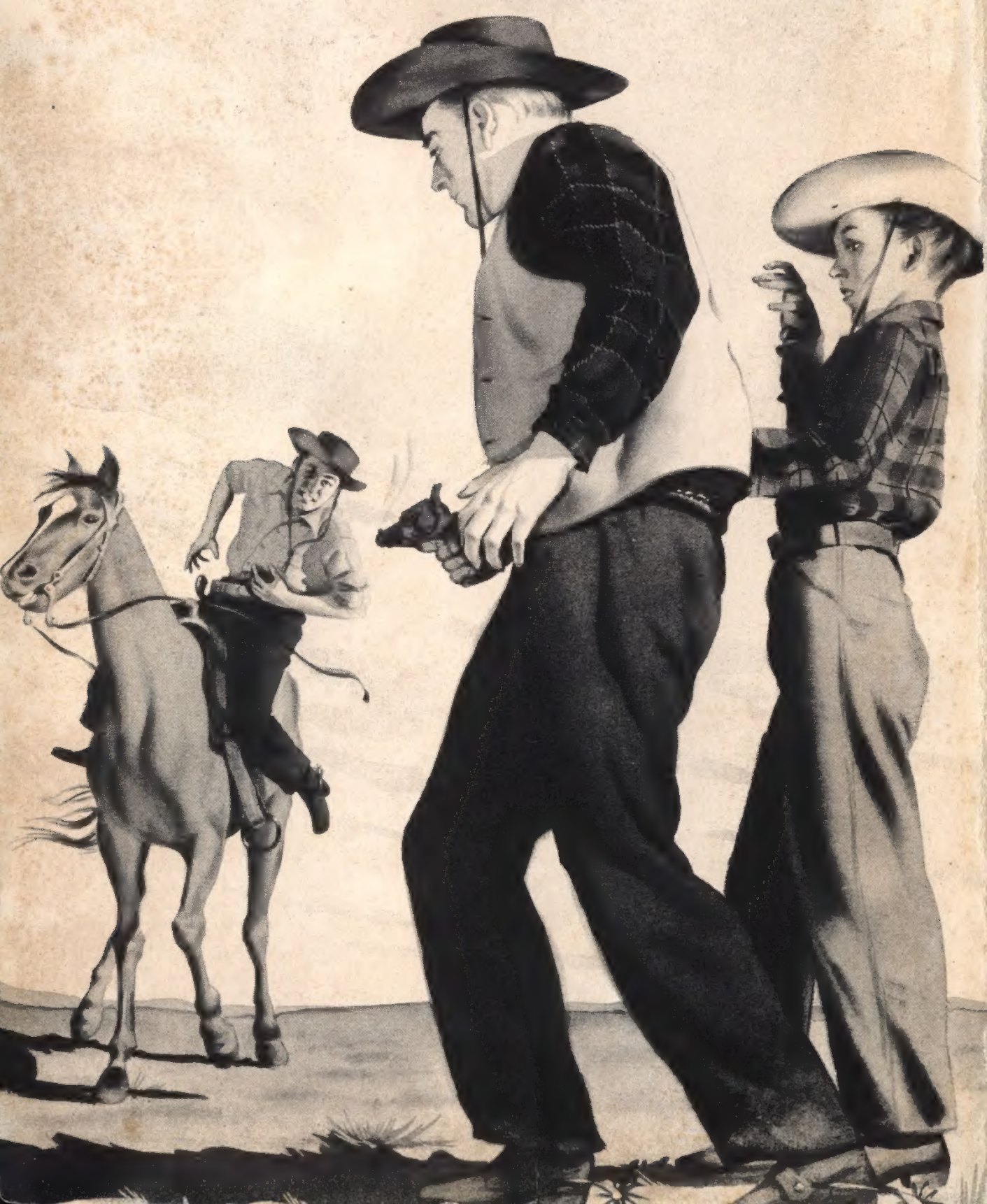
ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

A DELL MAGAZINE
DELL

THE TRAIL DRIVER BY ZANE GREY (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

A gun belched red and Wallen pitched from the saddle.

The Trail Driver, Chap. 4



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT

A STIRRING CHAPTER *of our history springs into pulsing life in the pages of "The Trail Driver." The unforgettable, hectic days of the Chisholm Trail, when a steady stream of cattle poured out of Texas to feed a growing nation, are pictured here in a vivid, thrilling manner. The trail to Dodge, broken by recklessly courageous men, could be kept open only by the sweat and blood of those who followed.*

Adam Brite knows full well what he is undertaking when he throws together a herd of five thousand head on the trail. To get the cattle to Dodge will be man's work—and Brite picks real men for the job. Texas Joe Shipman is chosen to ramrod the outfit, and in the trail crew is Panhandle Smith, notorious gunman and outlaw—altogether, a hard outfit for a hard job.

They start on the long northward trek in high spirits, but on the trail ahead of them lurks deadly danger that is to take more than one life before they reach Dodge City, cattlemen's Mecca. The first intimation that troubles other than weather and redskins are in store for Brite's outfit comes when a young cowboy mysteriously appears in their midst, pursued by a cattleman named Wallen and his lieutenant, Ross Hite. The youngster, Reddie Bayne, is taken on as horse wrangler. Almost immediately friction develops between the youthful cowboy and Texas Joe, the trail boss, and the situation scarcely improves when Texas Joe finds out that Reddie Bayne is not all he seems—

At one point in the great drive, while Brite's men are trying to save an emigrant train from the attacking Comanches, his entire herd is stolen by audacious Ross Hite. To recover it, Texas Joe and Panhandle Smith unlimber their guns and head after the rustlers under cover of a terrific thunderstorm. After a fierce gun fight the herd is recovered, and Brite's men set out once again for Dodge, only too well aware that their troubles are not yet over.

To be featured in the October issue of
ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE
the magazine abridgment of Zane Grey's

THE SHEPHERD OF GUADALOUPE

A thrilling story of two people caught in a tangled web of hate and lust from which death seems to be the only escape.

ON SALE ABOUT SEPTEMBER 7

The Trail Driver

By ZANE GREY

Chapter One

Santone

THAT hot summer day in June the Texas town of San Antonio was humming like a drowsy beehive. The year 1871 appeared destined to be the greatest for cattle drives north since the first one inaugurated by Jesse Chisholm in 1868. During the Civil War cattle had multiplied on the vast Texas ranges by the hundreds of thousands. There was no market. Ranches were few and far between, and the inhabitants very poor. Chisholm conceived the daring idea of driving a herd north to find a market. Despite the interminable distance, the hardships and perils, his venture turned out a success.

By the spring of 1871 the Chisholm Trail had become a deciding factor in the recovery of Texas. The hoofs of Texas longhorns and Spanish mustangs had worn a mile-wide trail across the undulating steppes of the Lone Star State.

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Adam Brite had already made one trip this year. Starting in March with twenty-five hundred head of cattle and seven drivers, he had beat the Indians and floods in his most profitable venture. The misfortunes of trail drivers following him that year could not dampen his ardor for a second drive. Buying cattle right and left, he had in sight a herd of four thousand five hundred. This would be by far the largest number of longhorns ever collected, let alone driven north.

Five boys were on the way to San Antonio from Uvalde Ranch with a herd, and their services had been secured in the sale. Brite did not care to undertake so big a job without at least ten of the hardest-riding and hardest-shooting drivers on the ranges. To this end he had been a busy man for the single day that he had been back in San Antonio. At Dodge his seven drivers had seemed to vanish as if by magic in the smoke and dust of that wildest of frontier posts. But Brite felt himself particularly fortunate in having secured one of Chisholm's right-hand drivers for his foreman.

Brite waited for this man, eager and hopeful. His lifelong friend, Colonel Eb Blanchard, had recommended Texas Joe Shipman, and promised to find him and fetch him around. The afternoon was waning now. The lobby of the Alamo Hotel was thinning out of its booted, spurred, and belted cattlemen. Brite was about to give up waiting when Colonel Blanchard entered with a young man who would have stood out paramount even among a host of rangy, still-faced, clear-eyed Texans.

"Heah yu air, Adam," called out Blanchard cheerily. "Tex, meet my old partner, Adam Brite, the whitest stockman in this state. Adam, this is Joe Shipman. He rode on my ootfit longer than I can recollect, an' has made two trips up the Trail. I vouch for Tex."

"Hod do, Shipman," replied Brite shortly, extending his hand. This rider was tall, wide-shouldered, small-hipped, lithe, and erect. His boldly cut features were handsome. He had tawny hair, eyes of clear amber, and a lazy, cool smile. He looked about twenty-four years old.

"Howdy, Mistah Brite," he replied. "I'm shore sorry to keep yu waitin' but I met an old pard, Less Holden, an' he poured aboot a barrel of applejack down me."

Brite knew Texans. He required no second look at this stalwart rider to like him.

"I'll leave yu to talk it over," went on Blanchard. "Reckon yu'd do wal to take Tex on right heah."

"All right, Colonel. Much obliged," replied Brite. "Come, Shipman, let's set down. What wages do yu want to be foreman on my next drive?"

"Wal, what'll yu pay?" inquired Shipman, and it was easy to see that he did not care what he got.

"Forty a month, considerin' we'll drive forty-five hundred head."

"Whew! An' how many drivers, Boss?"

"Ten, at least, an' fifteen if we can get them."

"Wal, we cain't never make it with only ten. There'll be hell shore up the Trail this summer."

"Will yu take the job?"

"I reckon so," drawled the rider. "Shore swore I'd never go again. Had a Comanche arrer in my shoulder. An' I'm packin' lead in my hip."

"Do yu know any riders yu can hire?"

"I might get my old pard, Less Holden," replied Shipman. "No better ever forked a hawss."

"Get him, an' half a dozen more. Also a cook. I'll go oot an' buy a new chuck wagon an' buy supplies, too."

"When yu aim to hit the Trail, Boss?"

"Soon as thet Uvalde ootfit comes in. We ought to get away day after tomorrow."

"All right, Boss. I'll do my best," replied the rider.

"Report to me heah after supper," concluded Brite. He watched the tall Texan move leisurely away and then shouldered his way into Hitwell's merchandise store. A motley horde of *vaqueros*, soldiers, cattlemen, drivers, Indians, and loungers filled the big place. Brite finally got Hitwell's ear. They had been in the cattle business together before the war. "Sam, what's all this aboot?"

"Wal, it's shore a rush," replied Hitwell, rubbing his hands. "If old Jesse Chisholm had foreseen this he'd have gone in the supply business."

"Reckon yu better duplicate thet order I gave yu in March an' add a third more to it."

"When yu leavin', Adam?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Be all packed for yu. Fresh supplies just in from New Orleans."

"How aboot a chuck wagon?"

"Sold oot, Adam. Haven't got a wagon left."

"Cain't yu get me one?"

"Wal, I'll try, but chances air slim."

"Hell! I'd better go rustlin' aboot."

He visited other stores without avail. It was long after sunset when he got back to the hotel. Brite had supper and then went out to look for Shipman. The heat of day had passed and it was pleasant sitting out in front. Presently soft steps and clinking spurs behind Brite drew his attention.

"Wal, Boss, I shore been lucky," drawled the voice of Shipman.

Brite turned to see the trail driver, accompanied by a flaming-faced youth with eyes of blue fire and an air of reckless insouciance.

"Hullo, Shipman. Shore glad yu had some luck. It's more than I had. Couldn't buy any kind of a wagon."

"Boss, this heah's my pard, Less Holden. He hails from Dallas. Less, shake with Mr. Brite."

"Who yu been ridin' for?" queried Brite.

"Dave Slaughter. But I've never been up the Trail."

"Holden, if yu've rode for Dave Slaughter yu're good enough for me. Shipman, what's the other good luck?"

"Boss, I corralled a boy named Whittaker. Couldn't be no better. An' I talked with a chap from Pennsylvania. Tenderfoot, but husky. Reckon yu better let me hire him. Santone is shore full of riders, but they've got jobs."

"Yes, by all means," replied Brite. "Hullo! did I heah my name called?"

"Shore did. Thet boy who just limped off his hawss there," returned Shipman, pointing.

Turning, Brite espied a mustang and rider that had arrived in front of the hotel. He had evidently just addressed one of the men present.

"Brite? Shore, he's around somewheres."

"Heah I am," called Brite. "Yu must be one of my boys with the Uvalde herd?"

"Shore am, Boss, an' glad to report we got in without losin' a steer."

"What's yore name?"

"Ackerman, sir."

"Meet my foreman, Shipman, an' his

pard, Holden."

"Howdy, Deuce," drawled Shipman, extending a hand.

"Doggone if it ain't Texas Joe," burst out the rider with a delighted grin.

"Whar yu beddin' the herd, Deuce?" asked Shipman, when the greetings were over.

"Aboot five miles oot in the creek bottom. Not much grass, but plenty of water."

"Have yu got a wagon?"

"Shore, an' a good cook. He's a niggah, but he shore is a white one. An' how he can cook!"

"Wal, Mr. Brite, this sounds like music to me," said Shipman. "Whar's the stock yu had heah already?"

"I've two thousand haid in three pastures just oot of town. We can bunch them on the Trail an' work along slow while Ackerman catches up."

"Shore, Boss, but we gotta have drivers," protested the foreman.

"There's eight of us now, includin' myself. I'd risk it with two more good men."

"Wal, we'll find them, somewhars. An', Boss, how aboot grub?"

"Ordered at Hitwell's. Let's see, Ackerman. Send yore wagon in early mawnin' tomorrow. An' after loadin' supplies have it catch up oot on the Trail."

"Wal, Boss, we'll comb Santone for a couple of drivers. An' in the mawnin' I'll be heah to help load thet chuck wagon."

"All right. I'll meet yu oot at the pastures. Good night."

Brite headed back toward the lobby of the hotel, to be confronted by a man he knew well, yet on the moment could not place. The blond, tight-lipped, gimlet-eyed Texan certainly recognized him. "Howdy, Brite. Don't yu-all know me?" he drawled.

"Shore I know yu. But I don't recollect yore handle," replied Brite.

"Wal, stick a pan on thet handle an' yu'll have me pat."

"Hell yes! Panhandle Smith!" exclaimed Brite. "How'd yu turn up heah?"

"Just rode in. An' I'm rustlin' north pronto."

"Wal, Panhandle, yu always was on the move. I hope it's not the same old—"

"Shore is, Brite. I cain't have any peace. I dropped into a little game of draw an' caught a caird-sharp at his tricks. Wal, I called him an' his pard an' they drawed on me. I had to shoot my way oot. Been ridin' hard an' just got in."

"On the dodge, eh?"

"Wal, it might be hot for me heah till thet fracas is forgotten."

"Panhandle, if I recollect right, yu used to drive cattle?"

"Wal, I reckon," replied Smith with a wistful smile.

"How'd yu like to help me drive a big herd north to Dodge?"

"Brite, I'd like it a heap. I don't want no wages. I can get a stake at Dodge," returned the other keenly.

"Yu're on. For wages, of course. Go get a good feed an' meet me heah in an hour or so."

"Wal, I appreciate this more than I can say, Brite," replied Smith, and strode away.

Brite watched him out of sight. And not until then did he realize what he had done. Hired one of the most notorious of Texas gun fighters to be a trail driver! It shocked Brite a little, but on second thought he laughed. This was frontier Texas. Panhandle Smith had been outlawed, but he had really been

more sinned against than sinning. Brite concluded that he was fortunate to engage the outlaw for his second drive north.

Chapter Two

Strange Recruit

BRITE'S first camp was Pecan Swale, some twelve or more miles out of San Antonio. Grass had been scarce until the drivers reached this creek bottom. The gigantic herd had drifted faster than usual, arriving at the Swale before sunset.

Shipman with the chuck wagon, and Ackerman with the second herd, rolled in together.

"Any drive close behind?" called Brite from his resting-spot in the shade.

"Nope, Boss. Henderson is startin' next with two herds. But he won't be ready for days. Then the herds will come a-whoopin'," returned the rider.

"Wal, thet's good. Shipman, I reckon yu better take charge now."

From his lounging-spot Brite studied his outfit of men, including the cook. Shipman had not been able to secure any more drivers. Brite thought it well indeed that he had taken on Panhandle Smith.

Bender, the tenderfoot from Pennsylvania, appeared to be a hulking youth, good-natured and friendly, though rather shy before these still-faced, intent-eyed Texans. Whittaker was a red-faced, sleepy-eyed young rider of twenty-two, notable for his superb physique.

The Uvalde quintet greatly interested Brite. Not one of them had yet reached twenty years of age. The dark, slim, bowlegged Deuce Ackerman appeared to be the most forceful personality. The youth who answered to the name San Sabe had Indian or Mexican blood, and his lean shape wore the stamp of *vaquero*. Rolly Little's name suited him. He was small and round. He had yellow hair, a freckled face, and flashing brown eyes, as sharp as daggers. Ben Chandler was a typical Texas youth, long, rangy, loose-jointed, of sandy complexion and hair and eyes of clear, light blue. The last of the five, Roy Hallett, seemed just to be a member of the group—a quiet, somber, negative youth.

Preparations for supper proceeded leisurely. Texas Joe left camp to climb the ridge from which he surveyed the valley. Upon his return to camp he announced:

"Trail riders haided for Santone. An' there's a lone hawssman ridin' in from 'cross country."

"Wal, Shipman, we'll shore see more riders than we want on this trip," said Brite.

"Boss, yu mean painted riders?" spoke up Ackerman.

"Not particular, if we're lucky. I had to feed a lot of Comanches last trip. But they made no trouble. I reckon the riders thet bother me most are the drifters an' trail dodgers."

"Boss, mebbe we'll be an ootfit thet breed had better pass up," drawled Shipman.

"Wal, I hope so. Yu cain't never tell what yore ootfit is until it's tried."

"Tried by what, Mr. Brite?" asked the tenderfoot Bender with great curiosity.

The boss laughed at this query. Before he could reply Shipman spoke up: "Boy, it's jest what happens along."

The conversation was interrupted at that point by the cook's yell: "Yo-all come an' git it!"

There ensued a merry scramble, and then a sudden silence. Hungry boys seldom wasted time to talk. Brite called for Moze to fetch his dinner over under the tree. It took no second glance for the boss to be assured that this cook was a treasure.

When dinner was over Shipman rose and addressed the outfit. "Wal, boys, I hate to say it, but we gotta get on guard. There's ten of us. Four on till midnight, three till three o'clock, an' three till mawnin'. Who goes on duty with me now?"

They all united in a choice of this early-night duty.

"I reckon I gotta make myself disliked," drawled Shipman resignedly. "Bender, yu saddle yore hawss. Lester, same for yu. An', Smith, I reckon I'd feel kinda safe with yu oot there."

"Suits me fine. I never sleep, anyhow," replied the outlaw, rising with alacrity.

"Deuce, I'll wake yu at midnight or thereaboots. Yu pick yore two guards. An' say, Boss, I 'most forgot. Who's gonna wrangle the hawsses? Thet's a big drove we got."

"Shore, but they're not wild. Herd them on good grass with the cattle."

"All right, we'll round them up. But we ought to have someone regular on thet job. Wal, so long. It's a lucky start."

Soon the camp was deserted save for the whistling Moze and Brite, who took pains about unrolling his canvas and spreading his blanket. A good bed was what a trail driver yearned for and seldom got. At least, mostly he did not get to lie in it long at a stretch. That done, Brite filled his pipe for a smoke. The afterglow burned in the west and against that gold a solitary rider on a black horse stood silhouetted dark and wild. A second glance assured Brite that it was not an Indian. Presently he headed the horse down into the Swale and headed for the chuck wagon.

"Howdy, cook. Will yu give me a bite of grub before yu throw it oot?" the rider asked in a youthful, resonant voice.

"Sho' I will, boy. But I'se tellin' yo nuthin' ever gits throwed away wid dis chile cookin'. Jus' yo git down an' come in."

Brite observed that the horse was a magnificent animal, black as coal, clean-limbed and heavy-chested, with the head of a racer. His rider appeared to be a mere boy. Brite strolled over with the hope that he might secure another trail driver.

"Howdy, cowboy. All alone?" he said genially.

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, looking up and as quickly looking down again. The act, however, gave Brite time to see a handsome face, tanned darkly gold, and big, dark, deep eyes that had a furtive, if not a hunted, look.

"Whar yu from?"

"Nowhere, I reckon."

"Lone cowboy, eh? Wal, thet's interestin' to me. I'm short on riders. Do yu want a job? My name's Brite an' I'm drivin' forty-five hundred haid north to Dodge. Ever do any trail drivin'?"

"No, sir. But I've rode cattle all my life."

"Ahuh. Wal, thet cain't be a very long while, son. Aboot how old air yu?"

"Sixteen. But I feel a hundred."

"Whar's yore home?"

"I haven't any."

"No? Wal, yu don't say? Whar's yore folks, then?"

"I haven't any, Mr. Brite. My dad an' mom were killed by Indians when I was a kid."

"Aw, too bad, son. Thet's happened to so many Texas lads. What yu been doin' since?"

"Ridin' from one ranch to another. I cain't hold a job long."

"Why not? Yu're a likely-lookin' youngster."

"Reckon I don't stand up good under the hardest ridin'. An' there's other reasons."

"How aboot hawss wranglin'?"

"Thet'd suit me fine. Would yu give me a job?"

"Wal, I don't see why not. Finish yore supper, lad. Then come have a talk with me."

All this while Brite stood gazing down at the youth, changing from curiosity to sympathy and interest. Not once after the first time did the boy look up. There were holes in his battered old black sombrero, through one of which peeped a short curl of red-gold hair. He had shapely brown hands, rather small, but supple and strong. The end of a heavy gun sheath protruded from his jacket on the left side. He wore overalls, high-top Mexican boots, and huge spurs, all the worse for long service.

Brite went back to his comfortable seat under the pecan tree. Dusk had fallen when the boy came over to present himself before the cattleman.

"My name is Bayne—Reddie Bayne," he announced, almost shyly.

"Redhaided, eh?"

"Not exactly. But I wasn't named for my hair. Reddie is my real given name."

"Wal, no matter. Air yu goin' to accept my offer?"

"I'll take the job. Yes, sir. Thanks."

"What wages?"

"Mr. Brite, I'll ride for my keep."

"No, I cain't take yu up on thet. It's a tough job up the Trail. Say thirty dollars a month?"

"Thet's more than I ever earned. Gosh! I'm glad! I'd better unsaddle Sam."

Bayne led the black under an adjoining pecan, and slipping saddle, bridle, and pack, turned him loose. Presently the lad returned to sit down in the shadow.

"How many in yore ootfit, Mr. Brite?"

"Ten. Countin' yu an' me an' the cook makes thirteen."

"Thet's unlucky, Mr. Brite. Perhaps I'd better ride on. I don't want to bring yu bad luck."

"Boy, yu'll be good luck."

"Oh, I hope so. I've been bad luck to so many ootfits," replied the youth, with a sigh.

Brite was struck at the oddity of that reply, but thought better of added curiosity. Then Deuce Ackerman and Chandler came rustling out of the shadow, coincident with the return of Little and Hallett.

"Boss, I seen a doggone fine black hawss oot heah. No pony. Big thoroughbred. I didn't see him in our *remuda*," declared Ackerman.

"Belongs to Reddie Bayne heah. He just rode up an' threw in with us. Bayne, heah's four of the Uvalde boys."

"Howdy, all," rejoined the rider.

"Howdy yoreself, cowboy," said Ackerman, stepping forward to peer down. "I cain't see yu, but I'm doggone glad to meet yu."

The other Uvalde boys called welcome greetings. Someone threw brush on the fire, which blazed up cheerily. It was noticeable, however, that Bayne

did not approach the campfire.

"Boss, did yu heah me shoot?" queried Ackerman.

"No. Did yu?"

"I shore did. Had an easy shot at a buck. But the light was bad an' I missed."

"Ssssh! Riders comin'," interrupted Chandler in a sharp whisper.

Brite heard the thud of hoofs off under the trees. Horses were descending the road from above. Then dark forms of horses and riders loomed in the outer circle of campfire light. They halted.

"Who comes?" called out Ackerman.

"Friends," came a gruff reply.

"Wal, advance, friends, an' let's see yu."

Just then a hard little hand clutched Brite's arm. He turned to see Reddie Bayne kneeling beside him. The lad's sombrero was off, exposing his face. It was pale, and the big dark eyes burned.

"Wallen! He's after me," whispered Bayne hoarsely. "Don't let him—"

Brite gripped the lad and gave him a little shake. "Keep still."

The riders approached the campfire, but did not come close enough to be distinctly seen. The leader appeared to be of stalwart frame, dark of face, somehow forceful and forbidding. Brite had seen a hundred men like him ride into Texas camps.

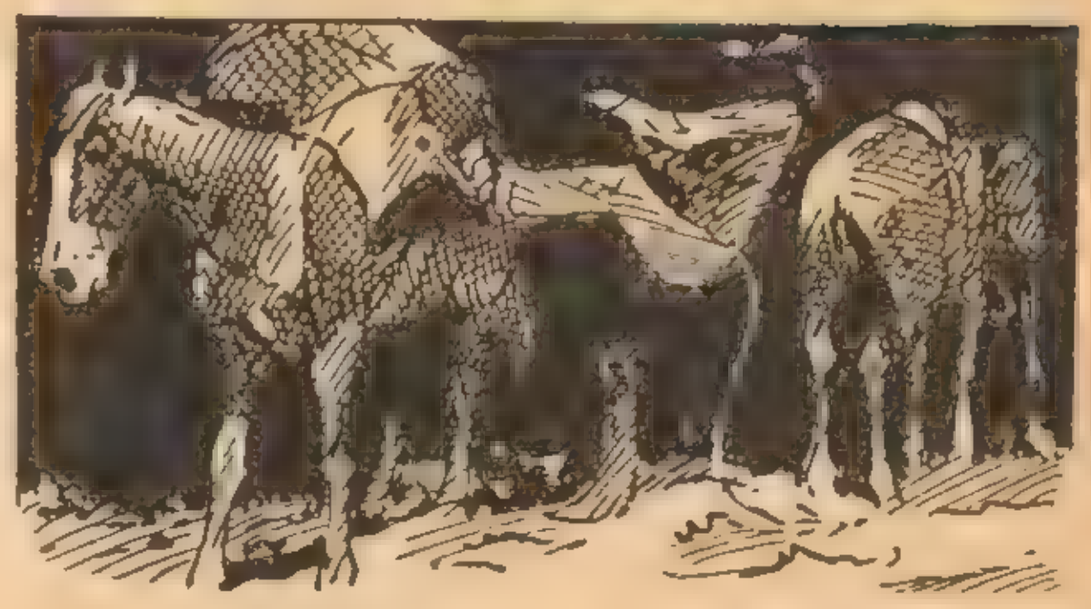
"Trail drivers, huh?" he queried, with gleaming eyes taking in the boys round the campfire.

"Wal, we ain't Comanche Injuns," retorted Deuce curtly.

"Who's ootfit?"

"Brite, of Santone. We got four thousand haid an' twenty drivers. Any more yu want to know?"

"Reckon yu took on a new rider lately, huh?"



"Wal, if we did—"

Brite rose to stride out into the firelight. "Who're yu an' what's yore business heah?"

"My name's Wallen. From Braseda. We tracked a—a young—wal, a feller whose handle was Reddie Bayne."

"Reddie Bayne. So thet was thet rider's name? What yu trackin' him for?"

"Thet's my business. Is he heah?"

"No, he isn't."

"Wal, then, he was heah, Brite."

"Shore. Had supper with us. An' then he cut oot for Santone. Reckon he's there by now."

"Brite, if yu don't mind we'll spend the nite heah," said Wallen speculatively.

"Wal, stranger, I'm sorry. One of my rules is not to be too hospitable on the old Trail," drawled Brite. "Yu see thet sort of thing has cost me too much."

"Air yu handin' me a slap?" queried Wallen roughly.

"No offense. Just my rule, thet's all." Brite's voice was firm, cold.

"Ahuh. Wal, it's a damn pore rule for a Texan."

"Shore," agreed Brite coolly.

The rider wheeled, cursing under his breath, and, accompanied by his silent companion, thudded off into the darkness. Brite waited until he could make sure they took the road, then returned to the spot where he had left the lad. Bayne sat against the tree. By the dim light Brite saw the gleam of a gun in

his hand.

"Wal, I steered them off, Bayne," said Brite. "Hope I did yu a good turn."

"Yu bet yu did. Thank yu—Mr. Brite," replied the lad in a low voice.

Deuce Ackerman had followed Brite under the tree. "Boss, thet Wallen shore didn't get nowhars with me. Strikes me I'd seen him some place."

"Who is Wallen, son?"

"Rancher I rode for over Braseda way."

"What's he got against yu?"

There was no reply. Ackerman bent over to peer down. "Throwed yore hardware, hey, Reddie? Wal, I don't blame yu. Now, cowboy, come clean if yu want to, or keep mum. It's all the same to us."

"Thank yu. I'm no rustler—or thief —or anythin' bad. It was just— Oh, I cain't tell yu," replied the lad with emotion.

"Ahuh. Wal, then it must be somethin' to do aboot a girl?"

"Yes—somethin' aboot a girl," hurriedly replied Bayne.

"I've been there, cowboy. But I hope thet hombre wasn't her dad. 'Cause she's liable to be an orphan."

Ackerman returned to the campfire, calling out, "Roll in, fellers. Yu're a-gonna need sleep this heah trip."

"Bayne, I'm shore glad it wasn't anythin' bad," said Brite in a kindly tone.

One of the boys rekindled the fire, which burned up brightly. By its light the old cattleman had a better view of young Bayne's face. The hard and bitter expression appeared softening. He made a forlorn little figure that touched Brite.

"I—I'll tell yu—sometime—if yu won't give me away," whispered the lad, and then hurried off into the darkness.

Chapter Three

A Leggin's Case

BRITE opened his eyes to gray dawn. He crawled out of his blankets, stiff and sore, to pull on his boots and don his vest, which simple actions left him dressed for the day. He rolled his bed. Then securing a towel, he made through camp for the creek. The water was cold and clear. Brite drank and washed and got back to camp in time to hear an interesting colloquy.

"Say, boy, who'n hell air yu?" Texas Joe was asking in genuine surprise. "I cain't recollect seein' yu before."

"My name's Reddie Bayne," replied the lad. "I rode in last night. The boss gave me a job."

"He did? Packin' water or what?" went on Shipman.

"Hawss wranglin'," said Reddie shortly.

"What yu packin' thet big gun on yore left hip for?"

"I'm left-handed."

"I see. Gun slinger from the left hip, huh? Wal, I reckon yu got a lot of notches on the handle."

Bayne did not deign to make a reply to this, but it was evident that he was a little upset by the cool and sarcastic foreman. As Brite came on he saw the lad's eyes flash.

"Mawnin', Boss. I see yu have gone an' hired another gunman," drawled Texas Joe.

"Reddie, shake hands with my foreman, Texas Joe Shipman," said Brite.

"Howdy, Mr. Shipman," rejoined Bayne resentfully, with emphasis on the prefix, and he did not offer his hand.

"Howdy, Girly-Boy," drawled Joe. "Suppose yu rustle yore hawss an' let me see him an' yore ootfit."

Bayne's face flamed red and he trotted off into the grove, whereupon Brite took occasion to acquaint Shipman with the incident that had made Bayne one of the outfit.

"Hell yu say! Wal! Pore kid! Wallen—now I just wonder where I've heahed thet name. Odd sort of handle. I'll bet my spurs he's no good. It's the no-good fellers' names thet stick in yore craw."

"Yo cow-tail twisters, come an' git it," sang out Moze.

The trail drivers ate standing. Texas Joe was the first to mount.

"Fork yore hawsses, boys," he called vibrantly. "Boss, I'll point the herd, then send Ackerman in with his guard to eat. Follow along, an' don't forget yore new hawss wrangler, young Bayne."

Brite bestrode his horse on the top of the slope and watched the riders point the herd and start the drive up out of the creek bottom. The wide-spread horns, gray and white and black, resembled an endless mass of uprooted stumps of trees, milling, eddying, streaming across the flat and up the green slope. The movement was processional, rhythmic, steady as a whole, though irregular in spots, and gave an impression of irresistible power. To Brite it represented the great cattle movement now in full momentum, the swing of Texas toward an Empire, the epic of the herds and the trail drivers that was to make history.

At last the wide base of the herd cleared the stream bed, leaving it like a wet, plowed field. Then the *remuda* in orderly bunch crossed behind. Brite recognized Reddie Bayne on his spirited black mount and trotted over to join him.

"Howdy, Reddie."

"Howdy, Mr. Brite."

"Wal, I'll ride along with yu an' do my share. Everythin' goin' good?"

"Oh yes, sir. I'm havin' the time of my life," rejoined the youth.

"Thet's good. I was some worried aboot yu last night," returned the cattleman, conscious of gladness at having befriended this lonely lad. "Have my boys been friendly?"

"Shore they have, sir. I feel more at home. They're the—the nicest boys I ever rode with. All except Texas Joe."

"Wal, now, thet's better. But what's Joe done?"

"Oh, he—he just took a—a dislike to me," replied the lad.

"Reddie, he may be teasin' yu. Don't forget yu're the kid of the ootfit. Yu'll shore catch hell."

"Oh, Mr. Brite, I don't mind atall—so long's they're decent. An' I do so want to keep this job. I'll love it. I'm shore I can fill the bill."

"Wal, yu'll keep the job, Reddie, if thet's what's worryin' yu. I'll guarantee it."

"Thank yu. An', Mr. Brite, since yu are so good I—I think I ought to confess—"

"Now see heah, lad," interrupted Brite. "Yu needn't make no more confessions. I reckon yu're all right an' thet's enough."

"But I—I'm not all right," returned the lad bravely, turning away his face. They were now walking their mounts some rods behind the *remuda*. "Mr. Brite, I—I'm not what I—I look—atall."

"No? Wal, as yu're a likely-lookin' youngster, I'm sorry to heah it. Why ain't yu?"

"Because I'm a girl."

Brite wheeled so suddenly that his horse jumped. He thought he had not heard the lad correctly.

Bayne faced him and snatched the old sombrero off. Brite found himself gazing into dark, violet, troubled eyes.

"I'm a girl," confessed Reddie hurriedly. "Everywhere I've worked I've tried to keep my secret. But always it was found oot. Then I suffered worse. So I'm tellin' yu, trustin' yu—an' if—or when I *am* found oot—maybe yu'll be my friend."

"Wal, I'm a son-of-a-gun!" burst out Brite. "Yu're a girl! Shore I see thet now— Why, Reddie, yu pore kid—yu can just bet yore life I'll keep yore secret, an' be yore friend, too, if it's found oot."

"Oh, I felt yu would," replied Reddie, and replaced the wide sombrero. With the sunlight off those big eyes and the flushed face, and especially the rebellious red-gold curls she reverted again to her disguise.

"Reddie, how long have yu been masqueradin' as a boy rider?"

"Three years an' more. Yu see, I had to earn my livin'. An' bein' a girl made it hard. So I got the idee pretendin' to be a boy would make it easier. Thet helped a lot. But I'd always get found oot. An' I'm scared to death thet hawk-eyed Texas Joe suspects me already."

"Aw no—no! Reddie, I'm shore an' certain not."

"But he calls me Girly-Boy!" ejaculated Reddie tragically.

"Thet's only 'cause yu're so—so nice-lookin'. Land sakes! If Texas really suspected he'd act different. All these boys would. They'd be as shy as sheep— Reddie, I've a hunch now thet hombre Wallen knows yu air a girl."

"Yu bet he does. Thet's the trouble."

"In love with yu?"

"Him! Why, Wallen's too low to love anyone, even his own kin, if he ever had any. He hails from the Big Bend country, an' I've heahed it said he wasn't liked around Braseda. He claims he bought me with a bunch of cattle. The same as a slave! I was ridin' for John Clay, an' he did let me go with the deal. Wallen made thet deal 'cause he'd found oot I was a girl. So I ran off an' he trailed me."

"Reddie, he'd better not follow yore trail up this way."

"Would yu save me?" asked the girl softly.

"Wal, I reckon, but Texas Joe or Panhandle would have thet hombre shot before I could wink," declared the cattleman in grim humor.

The girl turned an agitated face to him. "Mr. Brite, yu make me hope my dream'll come true—some day."

"An' how, Reddie?"

"I've dreamed some good rancher—some real Texan—would adopt me—so I could wear girl's clothes once more an' have a home an'—an'—" Her voice trailed away and broke.

"Wal, wal! Stranger things than thet have happened, Reddie," replied Brite, strangely stirred. On the moment he might have committed himself to much but for an interruption in the way of distant gunshots.

"Rumpus over there, Mr. Brite," suddenly called Reddie, pointing to a huge cloud of dust over the west end of the herd. "Yu better ride over. I'll take care of the hawsses."

Putting spurs to his mount, Brite galloped in the direction indicated. Hallett and Little were not in sight, and probably had been obscured by the dust. A low roar of trampling hoofs filled his ears. The great body of the herd appeared intact, although there

were twisting melees of cattle over toward the left on the edge of the dust line. Brite got around the left wing to see a stream of longhorns pouring out of the main herd at right angles. The spur was nearly a mile long, and bore the earmarks of a stampede. With too few drivers the danger lay in the possibility of the main herd bolting in the opposite direction. Except in spots, however, they were acting rationally. Then Brite observed that already the forward drivers had the stream curving back to the north. He became conscious of relief, and slowed up to take his place behind the most exposed section of the herd.

All across the line the cattle were moving too fast. A restlessness had passed through the mass. It was like a wave. Gradually they returned to the former leisurely gait and all appeared well again. Little rode past at a gallop and yelled something which Brite did not distinguish.

By late afternoon the great herd had surrounded a little lake in the center of an immense shallow bowl of rangeland. Trees were conspicuous for their absence. Moze had wisely hauled firewood, otherwise he would have had to burn buffalo chips for fuel. Brite walked his horse a mile along the left flank before he reached the chuck wagon and camp. These were at the head of the lake, from which slight eminence the whole center of the depression could be seen. Grama grass was fair, though not abundant. The cattle would need to be herded this night.

Reddie Bayne came swinging along on the beautiful black, always a delight to a rider's eye. Reddie reined in to accommodate Brite's pace.

"Heah we air, the long day gone an' camp once more. Oh, Mr. Brite, I am almost happy," declared Reddie.

"There shore is somethin' sweet aboot it. Make the best of it, Reddie, for God only knows what'll come.'"

"Ah! There's thet Texas Joe!" exclaimed Reddie as they neared camp. "Looks mighty pert now. I reckon he's pleased with himself for turnin' thet break back. Boss, what'll I do when he —he gets after me again?"

"Reddie, don't be mealy-mouthed," advised Brite, low-voiced and earnest. "Talk back. Be spunky. An' if yu could manage a cuss word or two it'd help a lot."

"Lord knows I've heahed enough," replied Reddie.

"Wal, if there ain't our Reddie," drawled Texas Joe when they rode into camp. "How many hawsses did yu lose, kid?"

"I didn't count 'em," replied Reddie sarcastically.

"Wal, I'll count 'em, an' if there's not jest one hundred an' eighty-nine yu're gonna ride some more."

"Ahuh. Then I'll ride, 'cause yu couldn't count more'n up to ten."

"Say, yu're powerful pert this evenin'. I reckon I'll have to give yu night guard."

"Shore. I'd like thet. But no more'n my turn, Mister Texas Jack."

"Right. I'm mister to yu. But it's Joe, not Jack."

"Same thing to me," returned Reddie, who on the moment was brushing the dust off her horse.

"Fellers, look how the kid babies thet hawss," declared Shipman. "No wonder the animal is pretty. Doggone me, I'll shore have to ride him tomorrow."

"Like bob yu will," retorted Reddie.

"Say, I was only foolin', yu darned little pepper pot. Nobody but a hawss

thief ever takes another feller's hawss."

"I don't know yu very well, Mister Shipman."

"Wal, yu're durned liable to before this drive is much older."

Somehow, Brite reflected, these two young people rubbed each other the wrong way. Reddie was quite a match for Texas Joe in quick retort, but she was careful to keep her face half averted or her head lowered.

"Reckon we'll all know each other before we get to Dodge."

"Ahuh. An' thet's a dig at me," replied Texas Joe peevishly. "Doggone yu, anyhow."

"Wal, haven't yu been diggin' me?" demanded Reddie spiritedly.

"Sonny, I'm Brite's trail boss an' yu're the water boy."

"I am nothin' of the sort. I'm the hawss wrangler of this ootfit."

"Aw, yu couldn't wrangle a bunch of hawg-tied suckin' pigs. Yu shore got powerful testy aboot yoreself, all of a sudden. Yu was meek enough this mawnin'."

"Go to hell, Texas Jack!" sang out Reddie with most exasperating flippancy.

"What'd yu say?" blustered Texas, passing from jest to earnest.

"I said yu was a great big, sore-haided, conceited giraffe of a trail-drivin' bully," declared Reddie in a very clear voice.

"Aw! Is thet all?" queried Texas, suddenly cool and devilish. Quick as a cat he leaped to snatch Reddie's gun and pitch it away. Reddie, who was kneeling with her back turned, felt the action and let out a strange little cry. Then Texas fastened a powerful hand in the back of Reddie's blouse, at the neck, and lifted her off her feet. Whereupon Texas plumped down to draw Reddie over his knees.

"Boss, yu heahed this disrespectful kid," drawled Texas, "Somethin' shore has got to be done aboot it."

Chapter Four

Trail Trouble

"SHIPMAN—don't yu—dare—smack me!" cried Reddie in a strangled voice.

But the blow fell with a resounding whack. Dust puffed up from Reddie's trousers. Both her head and feet jerked up with the force of the blow. She let out a piercing yell of rage and pain, then began to wrestle like a lassoed wildcat. But Texas Joe got in three more resounding smacks before his victim tore free to roll over and bound erect. If Brite had been petrified before, he was now electrified. Reddie personified a fury that was beautiful and thrilling to see. It seemed to Brite that anyone but these thick-headed, haw-hawing drivers would have seen that Reddie Bayne was an outraged girl.

"Oh-h-h! Yu devil!" she screamed and jerked for the gun that had been on her hip. But it was gone, and Lester had discreetly picked it up.

"Ump-umm, kid. No gunplay. This heah is fun," said Lester.

"Fun—hell!" Then quick as a flash Reddie leaped to deal the mirth-convulsed Texas a tremendous kick on the shin. That was a horse of another color.

"Aggh-gh-gh!" roared Texas, clasping his leg and writhing in agony. "Aw, my Gawd! My sore laig!"

Reddie poised a wicked boot for another onslaught. But she desisted and slowly settled back on both feet.

"Huh! So *yu* got feelin's?"

"Feelin's? Say, I'll—be—daid in a minnit," groaned Texas. "Kid, thet laig's full of lead bullets."

"If yu ever touch me again I'll—I'll fill the rest of yore carcass with lead."

"Cain't yu take a little joke? Shore I was only in fun. The youngest driver always gets joked."

"Wal, Texas Jack, if thet's a sample of yore trail-drivin' jokes, I pass for the rest of the trip."

"But, say, yu ain't no better than anybody else," protested Texas in a grieved tone. "Ask the boss. Yu wasn't a good feller—to get so mad."

Reddie appealed voicelessly to the old cattleman.

"Wal, yu're both right," declared Brite, anxious to conciliate. "Tex, yu hit too darned hard for it to be fun. Yu see Reddie's no big, husky, raw-boned man."

"So I noticed. He certainly felt soft for a rider— Kid, do yu want to shake an' call it square? I reckon I got the wust of it at thet. Right this minnit I've sixteen jumpin' toothaches in my laig."

"I'd die before I'd shake hands with yu," rejoined Reddie, and snatching up her sombrero and taking her gun from the reluctant Lester, she flounced away.

"Doggone!" ejaculated Texas ruefully. "Who'd took thet kid for such a spitfire? Now I've gone an' made another enemy."

"Tex, yu shore was rough," admonished Brite.

"Rough? Why, I got mine from a pair of cowhide hobbles," growled Texas and getting up, he limped about his tasks.

Presently Moze called them to supper, after which they rode out on fresh horses to relieve the guard. The long-horns had not quieted down for the night. Distant rumblings attested to restlessness at the other end of the herd. Brite patrolled a long beat, rifle across his pommel, keeping a sharp lookout for wolves. Before dark Reddie rode up.

"Hawsses all right, Boss. I reckon I'll hang around yore end. We all got orders to stand guard till called off."

A weird chanting music came on the warm air from the darkness. Brite recognized the Spanish song of a *vaquero*.

"San Sabe singin' to the herd, Reddie."

"Oh—how pretty! He shore can sing."

The moon came up and silvered the vast bowl, lending enchantment to the hour. Reddie passed to and fro, lilting a Dixie tune, lost in the beauty and serenity of the night. From a ridge pealed forth the long, desolate, blood-curdling moan of a prairie wolf. That brought the ghastly reminder that this moment was real—that there was death waiting just beyond.

Texas Joe came trotting up. "Boss, yu an' Reddie go to bed. Two hours off an' then two on, for five of us. I ain't shore yet thet all is wal. Reddie, yu got a sweet voice for a boy. I shore am a-wonderin' aboot yu."

"Boss, yu see?" whispered Reddie fiercely, clutching Brite's arm. "Thet hombre suspects me."

"Let him—the son-of-a-gun! Then if he finds yu oot it'll be all the wuss."

"For him or me?"

"For him, shore."

"How yu mean, Boss—wuss?"

"Wal, it'd serve him right to fall so dinged in love with yu thet—"

"Oh my Gawd!" cried Reddie in faint, wild tones, and spurred ahead to vanish in the shadows.

Next morning, when Brite presented himself for breakfast, Whittaker and Panhandle were the only drivers in camp. They were eating in a hurry.

"Herd movin', Boss," announced Smith. "We been called."

Brite answered their greetings, while his ears attuned themselves to the distant sound of hoofs. He ate hurriedly and rode on to fill in a wide breach behind the herd, and there he walked his horse, and rested, and watched the horizon to the rear, and found the long hours pleasant.

By mid-afternoon the endless, long slope, almost imperceptible until it had been surmounted, lay behind the herd and in front the land dropped to a creek bottom. Wide white bars of sand hemmed in a winding sheet of water. Across on the far bank dark green groves of timber and light green levels of grass invited camp and rest for that night. Four drivers, one after the other, pealed back the foreman's order: "Cross above. Keep movin'. Push the drags."

Brite saw the head of the great herd swerve to the west along the bank. The cattle appeared to roll in a bobbing stream down the incline. The after mass of longhorns crowded those in front, and the knocking of horns and bellowing of cows grew incessant. Brite saw that he was needed more around on the right flank, to help keep the stragglers in line and the slow ones from dropping back. When the red and white front of the herd appeared wading and wallowing across, then the difficulty of holding back the rear grew greater, and passed from hard riding to hazardous toil.

Like Comanche Indians these young riders yelled and rode, with fierce flashing eyes and many a ringing shout. Their profanity and grim humor seemed to fit their actions—all so hard, primitive, and inevitable.

They drove the cattle across the broadly marked sand bar and up into the timber. Beyond the strip of trees the great herd had stopped to graze on the green level, now contented with their lot.

"Right heah is good enough," said Texas wearily. "Deuce, keep an eye open for Moze. He'll need some direction an' mebbe help comin' across. Gosh! I'm as tired as if I'd done a day's work. An' wet. Sand in my boots! Damn the luck! Nice new boots! Heah, Red, pull 'em off for me. Thet's a good kid."

"Who was yore slave this time last year?" asked Reddie coolly.

"Never mind who, darn yu—" Then Texas subtly changed. "Say, I asked yu a favor. My hands air all skinned."

"Shore," agreed Reddie hastily, and with good grace pulled off Shipman's boots.

Deuce Ackerman sat his horse, peering back through the thin strip of trees to the river. "Tex, did yu see thet crippled steer this mawnin'?" he asked.

"No. How crippled?"

"By a big buffalo gun. Laig broke. I shot it."

"Buffalo gun! Who's got one in this ootfit?"

"Nobody."

"Texas, I heahed thet gun," put in Smith. "It woke me up."

"Ahuh. There was a camp near us, then. I reckoned I smelled smoke when we rode down to the lake."

"Shore. I seen smoke way down to the west. Made a little stringy cloud ag'in thet gold sunset."

"Campers wantin' meat, I reckon," spoke up Brite. He suggested what he

wanted to believe.

"Ump-umm," responded Deuce, pondering. "Thet was a tough old steer. An' he'd been shot from far off. Somebody took a pot shot at thet herd. But not for meat."

Texas looked from Panhandle to Brite, and the curious, cold little gleam in his amber eyes was something to see.

"Do you reckon we're bein' follered?" he queried.

"Like as not," returned Brite.

"What'd the idee be, if we was?" asked Smith. "We're a dozen strong. Thet'd be a fool trick."

"Smith, it looks bad. Tex has been up the Trail before. He knows an' I know thet the chances air stampeders air on our track. My herd is too big. An' my ootfit too small."

"Stampeders, eh? I *sabe*."

"Never had any trouble before," went on Brite. "Fact is I've been amazin' lucky. But I've heahed of the hell other herd owners have had. There's a regular drain on herds. Most of it comes from two-bit stampeders who collect a few haid heah an' there an' finally get enough to drive to Dodge on their own hook. An' again jealous drivers hire some of the trail dodgers to stampede the herd ahaid of them. It's a dirty bizness."

"Say, it's a shootin' bizness," declared Texas, with fire in his eyes. "Boss, will we do a little scoutin' back tonight, or wait an' see if—"

"Let's wait," interrupted Brite. "If we air trailed we'll shore find it oot soon enough. An' if we're not it's no matter."

When Brite arose next morning, the herd was up and moving. He went over to the chuck wagon, where Texas Joe and Reddie Bayne were devoting themselves to breakfast. They were the only riders in camp. Brite hunkered down to join them, when suddenly Texas Joe got up, his lean head sticking out like that of a hawk as he peered to the south.

"What yu heah, Tex?" queried Brite sharply.

"Hawsses."

Brite soon had to confess that Texas was correct. Presently a group of riders appeared at the far corner of timber. Brite counted seven or eight, all dark figures, coming at a brisk trot. Texas gave one long look, then turned to Brite.

"Boss, thet bunch has been watchin' us," he said, his eyes gleaming. "Timed us nice. Our boys just left an' the guard not in sight."

Suddenly Reddie Bayne leaped up, letting her pan clang to the ground.

"Wallen an' his ootfit!" cried Reddie, startled.

"Shore aboot thet, boy?" asked Texas darkly.

"Yes, shore. I know *him*. I'll bet they stampeded my *remuda*—an' now they're after me."

"Wal, keep back an' be careful what yu say— Brite, have yore Winchester handy. Let me do the talkin'. This heah's a time we may need yore Panhandle Smith."

The dark, compact bunch of riders closed the gap quickly and drew up in a semicircle just opposite the fire and chuck wagon. Brite did not need to question their character and intent—not this time! He recognized the swarthy Wallen, whose big bold eyes swept the camp, and the range beyond. Foremost of the other riders was a more striking individual even than Wallen—a man of about fifty years, with a visage like a bleak stone bluff

and eyes like fiery cracks. Brite had seen this same man somewhere. The five others were a likely crew for these leaders—all young, lean, unkempt cowboys.

"Wal, heah's our Reddie Bayne," spoke up Wallen gruffly, pointing a heavy hand at Reddie.

"Shore an' proper, Wal," replied his lieutenant in a dry, crisp voice.

Whereupon Wallen turned his rolling eyes upon Brite. "Lied to me back on the Trail a ways—hey, Brite?"

"If I did I'll stick to it," retorted Brite, his blood leaping.

Texas Joe strode forward and to one side, getting out of line of the chuck wagon with a significance that no Texan could have mistaken.

"Wallen, I see some of yore outfit packin' needle guns on their saddles," he said with biting sarcasm.

"What if they air? We're huntin' buffalo."

"Ahuh. Thet's what *yu* say."

"I'll talk to Brite, an' not to yu, cowboy," declared Wallen aggressively.

"Yu talk to Texas Joe," interposed Brite caustically.

"Brite, we want thet youngster yu kidnaped, Reddie Bayne," declared the leader of the visitors.

"Wallen, I ain't used to palaverin' with men like yu," rejoined Texas bitingly.

"Who the hell air yu?" shouted Wallen hoarsely.

"Wal, I know this hombre," said Wallen's partner. "It's Texas Shipman."

"That means nothin' to me."

"Then yu do the talkin', pard," returned his companion in a cool hard voice that told Brite much. This lieutenant was the more dangerous man.

"I shore don't need yu, Ross Hite, to do my talkin'," snorted Wallen.

Ross Hite! Brite responded to that name, well known to trail drivers. Hite had run the gamut of all Texas occupations known to the range.

"Wal, *talk* then, damn yu, an' make it short," shot out Texas. "What yu want?"

"We're drivin' our stock on ahaid," replied Wallen bluntly. "Yu travel too slow, an' they're crowdin' us. I want this rider, Reddie Bayne. He come to me in a deal I made with Jones at Braseda."

"Ahuh. Does Bayne owe yu his services?"

"He shore does."

"What yu say, Reddie?"

Reddie leaped forward. "He's a damn liar, Texas," shrilled Reddie passionately. "I've run off from three ranches to get away from him."

"Shet up or it'll be the wuss for yu," replied Wallen stridently.

"Slow there, Wallen," rang out Texas. "This heah is a free country. The days of slaves, white or black, is over."

"Reddie, tell *why* Wallen wants yu," spoke up Brite cunningly. His Texan blood was not proof against this evasion. Besides, out on a far ridgetop he descried a dark rider coming fast. Panhandle!

"Oh—Tex," burst out Reddie poignantly, "he's after me because—'cause I'm—a—I'm not what yu—think."

Texas stiffened slightly, but never turned the breadth of a hair from the rider he was facing. Wallen's face turned a dirty gray.

"What air yu—Reddie?" queried Texas, low and cool.

"I—I'm a—girl, Texas—an' thet's why," replied Reddie huskily.

"*Look oot!*" shouted Ross Hite piercingly.

Wallen clapped his hand to his hip.

Texas appeared to blur in Brite's strained sight. A gun belched red, and with the loud crack Wallen jerked up with terrible, sudden rigidity. His dark face changed from hideous rage to an awful ghastliness, and he pitched from the saddle to fall with sodden crash. His horse lunged away. The other horses reared and snorted.

"Haid aboot or I'll bore yu!" yelled Texas, his gun outstretched. "Brite, back me up with yore rifle. Reddy, line oot heah!"

Brite had scarcely needed the ringing order, for his rifle was leveled before Texas had finished. Likewise, Reddie leaped forward, fearless and menacing.

All the riders except Ross Hite had wheeled abruptly. Several were walking their horses away. Hite showed no fear in his lean sallow face as he peered from Texas to the prostrate Wallen, and then back across the camp. Brite heard the thud of flying hoofs, and farther back the violent cries of riding cowboys.

"Brite, do yu want us to pack Wallen away?" queried Hite.

"No, thanks, we'll tend to him," retorted Brite sarcastically.

Just then a horse plunged by the chuck wagon and, being pulled up short, slid to a halt, scattering dust and gravel everywhere. Panhandle Smith leaped off in their midst, a gun magically appearing in each hand. It was then Brite's tension relaxed.

"What's the deal?" asked Smith quietly.

Ross Hite stared hard at Smith and then laughed harshly. "Wal, Brite, yu air a trail driver thet goes heeled. Texas Shipman an' now Panhandle Smith!"

"Rustle oot of heah!" ordered Texas.

"Men, this was Wallen's deal, not mine," returned Hite and turning his horse, he drove his companions ahead of him, quickly breaking into a gallop. Soon they passed round the corner of timber whence they had come.

Only then did Texas Joe move. He gave a quick glance at the dead Wallen and then wheeled with pale face and glittering eyes.

"Heah yu, Reddie Bayne," he called, and in two long strides he confronted Reddie. "Did yu say yu was a girl?"

"Yes, Texas Joe—I—I am," replied Reddie, and took off her sombrero to prove it. Her face was ashen and her eyes darkly dilated with receding terror. Texas fastened his left hand in her blouse and drew her up on her toes, close under his piercing gaze. His tawny hair stood up like the mane of a lion. But his cold fury was waning. Bewilderment hung close upon his passion.

"Yu—yu— All the time—yu've been a—a girl?" he broke out hoarsely.

"Yes, Texas, all the time," she whispered, sagging in his iron grasp. "I—I didn't mean to fool yu. I told the boss. I—I wanted to tell you, but he wouldn't let me— I—I'm sorry."

Chapter Five

Showdown

TEXAS JOE appeared to shrink. He released Reddie so suddenly that she sagged and almost sank down, her hand at the neck of her blouse.

"Ootrag-eous of yu!" panted Texas as his pallid face grew red. "Makin' oot yu was a boy—before us all! An' lettin' me spank yu—an'—"

"Let yu!" flashed Reddie, her face flaming worse than his. "Why, yu darn

big brute, I couldn't help myself!"

"An' all thet camp cussin' of ours—an' dirty talk before a girl! My Gawd! Yu done a turrible thing, Miss Reddie Bayne!"

"I reckon, but it was these damn hombres like *him*—thet drove me to it," declared Reddie passionately, pointing a shaking finger at the ghastly, quiet Wallen.

With that, Texas Joe seemed to realize the tragic side of what had happened. Wheeling abruptly away from the girl, he sheathed his gun and bent a grim, strange look upon the dead man.

"Search him, some of yu," he said, sharp and cold. "Drag him oot an' throw him in thet wash. Come a-rustlin' now, all of yu. Let's get oot of this."

"Whar yu goin', Tex?" called Brite as the driver strode away.

"Take my hawss," cried Reddie after him.

But Texas Joe paid no heed to either. Soon he passed out of sight in the low brush. Then the strain among those around the campfire relaxed. Reddie sat down as if her legs had grown weak.

"I've seen men shot before—but *never* for *me*," she whispered. "I feel like a—a murderer."

"Nonsense, Reddie," spoke up Brite brusquely. "I'd have bored Wallen myself if Texas hadn't. Panhandle, did yu see thet one of Wallen's ootfit forked a hawss of mine?"

"No, Boss, I didn't. Fact is I had eyes only for Ross Hite."

"Wal, it's true. When I bought thet bunch of stock I happened to take notice of a little bay mustang with a white face. I don't mistake hawsses I've once looked over. Wallen's ootfit must have run off some of our *remuda* last night."

"Boss, I don't know Wallen, but he shore was ridin' in bad company," said Panhandle.

"Ahuh. Yu know this Ross Hite?" rejoined Brite.

"Wal, rather. He was a cattle buyer at Abilene. But he got into shady deals an' found Abilene too hot for him. Surprises me, though, to find him stampedin' a few hawsses. I reckon thet was just by the way. Or else he's goin' to work somethin' big on this Chisholm Trail."

"Humph! Mebbe Hite is at the haid of this new game," declared the boss seriously. "Cattle drivers sometimes lose half their stock from stampeders. I've heahed of one whole herd bein' stole."

"Texas Joe ought to have done for Hite same as Wallen. Hite will give us trouble on the way up," said Smith darkly.

Meanwhile Ackerman, with Whittaker and San Sabe, had dragged the dead Wallen out of camp. They returned presently packing gun and belt, spurs, a huge silver watch, and a heavy, fat wallet.

"Boss, I opened this," said Ackerman, handing over the wallet. "He shore was heeled."

Brite found the greasy wallet stuffed full of greenbacks.

"Say, he must have robbed a bank," declared the boss in amazement. "Boys, hundreds of dollars heah. What'll we do with it?"

"What yu think?" queried Deuce Ackerman sarcastically. "Yu want me to ride after Wallen's ootfit an' give thet money to his pards?"

"No. I was only figgerin'. I'll keep this an' divide it among yu boys at the end of the drive. It'll be a big bonus."

The drivers gave vent to great appreciation of this decision. Brite stowed the money away in his saddlebag, and put the other articles of Wallen's in the chuck wagon.

"Boys, did yu look where Texas Joe hit thet Wallen?" asked Panhandle curiously.

"Shore. Right in the middle of Wallen's left vest pocket. Bullet went through his tobacco pouch."

"Pretty daid-center shot for such a quick throw," went on Smith ponderingly. "Thet Texas Joe must be there on the draw."

Brite was familiar with this peculiar interest of the gunman in regard to the proficiency of others. He replied that the cattleman who had recommended Shipman had made significant mention of the fact.

"Hurry an' eat, boys," went on Brite. "We want to be on the prod."

All but Reddie Bayne answered to that suggestion with alacrity. Reddie sat with her face in her hands, her red-gold curls exposed. She made a pretty and a pathetic little figure, which Brite observed was not lost upon the shy cowboys. Deuce Ackerman looked at her several times, and finally conquered his evident embarrassment.

"Come on, Reddie. Don't take it so hard," he said gallantly. "Shore if *we* can stand it, yu can. We know yu're a girl now an' if yu can only overlook our—our—"

Deuce broke off there, manifestly unable to find words to express his shame for their talk and behavior before a girl. Reddie answered to that instantly, arising to come to the wagon, a blush dyeing her pale cheek.

"Thank yu, Deuce," she replied, bravely conquering her confusion. "But none of yu boys need feel bad aboot it. Texas was the only one who hurt my feelin's. I'm shore glad not to be ridin' under false colors no more."

Soon they had finished their hasty breakfast and were off for the day's drive. The slow miles passed to the rear, and the westering sun had sunk low and dusky red before Shipman halted for the night. This day's drive would total fifteen miles, a long journey for grazing cattle. Water had been crossed about mid-afternoon, which was well for the stock, because this was a dry camp. Grass was luxuriant, and buffalo chips abundant. Moze halted his chuck wagon in the lee of an outcrop of rock, which was the only obstruction on the level land. Brite finished his own chores and then packed in chips for the campfire. Not until a dusky haze had mantled the range did he stop gazing back to the southward.

Texas Joe did not ride in until after the night shift had gone on guard. He was silent and taciturn, aloof as Brite had seen other men who had lately snuffed out human life. Texas ate alone, kneeling beside the fire. More than once Brite caught him kneeling there, cup in hand, motionless, his thoughts far from the moment. Presently he slipped away in the darkness and Brite saw him no more.

After supper Reddie came over and sat beside Brite. "I cain't get this mawnin' off my chest," she whispered. "Wasn't he terrible?"

"Who? Wallen?"

"Wallen! No, he was just low-down. I mean Texas Joe—wasn't he fierce? I could have dropped in my tracks when he shot Wallen. Just as quick as thet! Just the moment I confessed I was a girl—an'—Wallen was after me. Oh! He *killed* him! I prayed for some rider to do thet very thing. But when it

was done I was sick. My blood curdled. Yet even thet wasn't as bad as when Texas grabbed me by the throat an' nearly jerked me oot of my boots. 'All the time yu was a girl—*all* the time,' he barked at me. I'll never forget thet."

"Aw, yes, yu will, Reddie," replied Brite soothingly. "Tex took the sap oot of me, too. Gawd! how quick he bored thet skunk! Why even Panhandle remarked aboot it. Just forget it, Reddie. We've lots more comin', I reckon, this trip."

"But, Mr. Brite," she faltered. "I—I got the idee Texas Joe thought Wallen had—thet I was a—a hussy."

"Reddie! I'm shore he's thought nothin' of the kind," replied Brite hastily.

"Oh, yes he did. He looked at me so! I could have sunk in my boots. Mr. Brite, I—I just couldn't go on with yore ootfit if he thought I was a bad girl."

"Tex was only shocked. Same as me—an' all of us. It doesn't happen every day, Reddie—a pretty kid of a girl droppin' in on us oot of the sky. Yu see, Tex had swore at yu, an' spanked yu thet time, an' otherwise put familiar hands on yu withoot the least idee yu was anythin' but a boy. He's so ashamed he cain't come aboot."

"It's very kind of yu to say thet, Mr. Brite," rejoined Reddie. "I wish I could believe yu. But I cain't. An' I cain't *ask* him—dammit!"

"Reddie, yu're all upset," replied Brite, moved at the convulsed pale face and the dark eyes. "Yu go to bed. In the mawnin' yu'll feel better."

"Sleep! What's to keep thet man Hite from sneakin' in heah with his ootfit, knifin' yu all, an' makin' off with me?"

The startling query acquainted Brite with the fact that there was not very much to oppose such a catastrophe. Too many drivers were required on guard.

"Reddie, thet's sort of far-fetched," said Brite.

"It's been done over Braseda way. I heahed aboot it."

"I'm a light sleeper, Reddie. No Comanches, even, could surprise me."

Reddie shook her curly head as if she were unconvinced. "It's tough enough to be a girl in town," she said. "Oot heah on the Trail it's hell."

"No one but Wallen's ootfit knows. An' shore they won't come bracin' us again. Go to bed, Reddie, an' sleep."

The next day turned out uneventful. Shipman drove at least twelve miles. Brite observed that his foreman often faced the south to gaze long and steadily. But nothing happened and the night also proved quiet. Another day saw a lessening of anxiety. Ross Hite had not passed them in daylight, that was a certainty. A mild thunderstorm overtook the drivers on the following day, and the wet, shiny horns of the cattle and the fresh, dank odor of thirsty earth were pleasant.

Coon Creek and Buffalo Wallow, Hackberry Flat, The Meadows, and night after night at unnamed camps took the drivers well on into June. Buffalo began to show in straggly lines on the rise of prairie to the west. A few unfriendly riders passed at a distance. Brite began to think that good luck attended his trail again, and forgot the days and camps.

Meanwhile, except for the aloof Texas Joe and Panhandle, the outfit had grown into a happy family. Reddie

Bayne had been a good influence so far. Rivalry for her favor, for who should wait upon her in any conceivable way that she would permit, lacked not friendly spirit, for all its keenness.

Nevertheless, where Texas Joe was concerned there appeared to be smoldering fire. He watched Reddie from afar with telltale eyes. And Reddie, when she imagined she was unobserved, let her dreamy gaze stray in Joe's direction. As foreman he had the responsibility of the herd, and day and night that was his passion. All the same he followed imperceptibly in the footsteps of his riders. Seldom did Joe address Reddie; never did he give her another order. Sometimes he would tell Brite to have her do this or that with the *remuda*. In camp he avoided her when that was possible. He seemed a weary, melancholy rider, pondering to himself.

Brite saw how this aloofness worked upon Reddie. She had come into her own, and his indifference piqued her. Reddie never lost a chance to fret and fume to Brite about his foreman. Pride and vanity had come with the championship of the cowboys. Despite her ragged male attire, she no longer could have been taken for other than a girl. Some kind of a climax was imminent.

One early-evening camp at Blanco River all the drivers but three were in, and Texas Joe was among the former. It had been an easy day until the crossing of the wide stream, where some blunders, particularly with the *remuda*, had ruffled the foreman. He gave Ackerman one of his roundabout orders for Reddie. They were through supper and Joe was about ready to take the night guard out. Suddenly Reddie flashed a resentful face in Joe's direction.

"Say, what kind of a foreman air yu —givin' orders to yore hawss wrangler through a third person?" flashed Reddie scornfully. "I'm on this ootfit. I'm gettin' wages. Yu cain't ignore me."

"Cain't I?" queried Texas in helpless rage. It was evident that he could not. More than evident was it that something inexplicable and infuriating was at work upon him.

"No, yu cain't—not no more," continued Reddie, carried beyond reserve. "Not withoot insultin' me, Texas Jack Shipman."

"Stop callin' me Texas Jack," shouted the driver.

"I'll call yu wuss'n thet pronto. An' I'll say right now of all the conceited, stuck-up cowboys I ever seen yu're the damnedest. Yu're too proud to speak to poor white trash like me. So yu order me aboot through the boss or one of the boys, or even Moze. An' I'm callin' for a showdown, Tex Shipman."

"Boss, do I have to stand heah an' take all this?" appealed Joe, turning shamefacedly to Brite.

"Wal, Tex, I don't reckon yu have to, but I'd take it if I was yu' an' get it over," advised Brite conciliatingly.

Thus championed by her employer, Reddie gave way utterly to whatever complicated emotions were driving her. Like a cat she sprang close to Texas and glared up at him, her eyes blazing, her breast heaving.

"Yu can tell me right heah an' now, in front of the ootfit, why yu treat me like dirt under yore feet," she demanded huskily.

"Wrong again, Miss Bayne," drawled Texas. "Yu flatter yoreself. I jest didn't think aboot yu atall."

"Tex Shipman, yu killed a man to save me, but it wasn't for *me* particularly? Yu'd done thet for any girl, good or—or bad?"

"Why, shore I would."

"An' yu had yore doubts aboot me then, didn't yu, cowboy?"

"Wal, I reckon so. An' I—still got—them," rejoined Texas haltingly. He had doubts about himself, too, and altogether the situation must have been galling to him.

"Yu bet yu have!" flashed Reddie, scarlet of face. "Come oot with them then—if yu're not yellow! First—yu think I—I'm bad, don't yu?"

"Wal, if yu're keen aboot thet, I don't think yu're so—so damn good!"

"Oh-h!" cried the girl poignantly. Then she gave him a stinging slap with her right hand and another with her left.

"Heah! Yu got me wrong!" yelled Texas, suddenly horrified at the way she took his scathing reply, and he backed away from her flaming assault. But it was too late. Reddie was too violently outraged to comprehend what seemed clear to Brite, and no doubt all the gaping listeners.

"I ought to kill yu for thet," whispered Reddie. "An' I would, by Gawd! but for Mr. Brite! Oh, I've knowed all along yu thought I was a hussy—thet Wallen had— Damn yu, Tex Shipman. Yu don't know a decent girl when yu meet one! Yu gotta be told. An' I'm tellin' yu—Wallen was a dirty skunk. An' he wasn't the only one who hounded me oot of a job. All because I wanted to be decent. An' I *am* decent—an' as good as yore own sister, Tex Shipman—or any other boy's sister! To think I—I have to *tell yu!*— I ought to do thet—with a gun—or a hawsswhip."

Suddenly she broke down and began to sob. "Now—yu can go to hell—Tex Shipman—with yore orders—an' with what—yu think aboot me! Yu're dirt—under—*my* feet!"

Chapter Six

Something Stirring

REDDIE plunged away into the gathering dusk as if she meant to leave that camp forever. Brite decided he would not let her go far, but before following her he took note of the group at the campfire. Texas Joe stared after Reddie. The boys began to upbraid him in no friendly terms, when Panhandle silenced them with a gesture.

"Tex, this is liable to split our ootfit," he said, putting a hand on the cowboy's shoulder. "It won't do. We all know yu didn't think Reddie's no good. But *she* doesn't know. Square thet pronto."

Brite hastened after Reddie, and coming up with her just out of the campfire light he detained her with a gentle hand.

"Lass, yu mustn't go runnin' off."

"Tell me yu don't—believe it," she begged.

"Believe what, lass?"

"What Texas thinks—aboot me."

"Wal, I should smile not. None of the boys do. An' I reckon Tex himself—Heah he comes, Reddie."

She stiffened and appeared to hold her breath. Texas strode up to them, bareheaded in the dusk. Only his eyes could be seen and they gleamed darkly.

"Reddie Bayne, yu listen to me," he began sternly. "If yu wasn't such a darned little spitfire yu'd never disgraced me before the ootfit. I—"

"Disgraced *yu?*" she interrupted.

"Yes, me. I swear to Gawd I had no idee atall thet yu wasn't as honest an'—an' good as any girl. I meant yu was a queer, contrary, temperish, spiteful

little devil. But only thet. *Sabe?* An' I'm sorry I upset yu an' I want to apologize."

"Yu're aboot six days too late, Texas Jack," she burst out defiantly. "An'—an' yu can go to hell, anyhow."

He gave her a slow, strange glance. "Wal, I'll have company, for thet's where this ootfit is haided," he replied coldly, and stalked away.

"There! I've—done—it—now," she whispered, as if to herself. "I should have—acted the—the lady. But I—I hate him so."

Brite formed his own conclusion about how she hated Texas Joe. It also came to him, and stronger than formerly, how he had come to feel toward Reddie. This was the time to tell it.

"Lass, I reckon folks oot on the Chisholm Trail can have feelin's the same as when they're home safe an' sound. Mebbe stronger an' deeper an' better feelin's. Anyway, I'm goin' to ask yu somethin' particular. I'm alone in the world. No near kin. An' I'd like to have yu for a daughter. How aboot it?"

"Oh, it'd be my dream come true," she cried ecstatically. "Oh, if only I'm worthy!"

"Let me be the judge of thet," he replied happily. "I have a ranch ootside Santone. An' yu can make it yore home. All I ask is thet yu care a little for me."

"I love yu now, Mr. Brite," she whispered generously, and hugged him. "Oh, it's too good to be true."

"Wal, then, do yu accept me as yore adopted dad?"

"I cain't thank God enough," she murmured.

"It's settled an' I reckon I'm doin' some thankin' on my own hook."

"Yu air so good an' kind. Oh, this ootfit is different— I wonder what *he* will say when he finds oot."

"Who?"

"Thet cowboy."

"Aw, he'll have me to reckon with now. But, Reddie, we'll keep it secret till we get to Dodge."

Brite was unrolling his bed when he felt something fine and cold touch his cheek. Rain! He had been so preoccupied that he had not observed any change in weather conditions. The stars had grayed over. All the north appeared gloomy and black.

"Reddie, it's goin' to rain," he called. "Fetch yore bed over under the wagon."

But Reddie was in the land of dreams. Brite took his long slicker and, stepping across to where Reddie lay, spread it over her bed. Brite experienced a new sensation—a warm wave of joy at realization of his new responsibility. Hearing voices, he went over to the wagon. The boys were moving their beds under it. The wind had quickened, blowing a fine, chilly mist in Brite's face.

"Wal, Boss, our luck has changed," spoke up Texas grimly. "We've shore been too damn lucky. Now it's comin'."

"What's comin', yu gloomy geezer?"

"A norther, first off. I don't know what after thet. If thet wind comes stronger with rain we'll have a driftin' herd. An' I'd shore hate to have them drift south. Bad for us."

"It's kind of northwest, Tex," replied Brite, holding his hand up.

"Jest as bad, 'cept a norther lasts three days. Mebbe it's nothin' much. We'll know in a couple of hours. Which I'm gonna use sleepin'."

They rolled in their blankets in the shelter of the stretched tarpaulin. Texas dropped off into slumber by the

magic of youth. Brite did not feel sleepy. The warmth of his blankets told him just how cold the air had grown. He lay there resting and listening.

The wind moaned steadily, weirdly, and whipped in chilly gusts under the wagon, flopped the canvas, and swept away mournfully. Coyotes barked about the camp. Somewhere out there in the black, windy void the great herd would be stirring uneasily in their beds. The old mossy-horns would be bawling. And the guards would be singing to them. What a singular and tremendous movement this was—the driving of cattle herds north! Lying there, Brite seemed to have a vision of what magnitude this business would attain, how it would save Texas and pave the way for an empire.

These pondering thoughts might have merged into dreams, for all Brite knew, but they were disrupted sooner or later by the thud of plunging hoofs and a ringing voice.

"All oot. Herd driftin'."

When Brite sat up, Texas Joe was on his knees, rolling his bed.

"What time, Deuce?" he called.

"After midnight. Tex, we'll need lanterns. Cain't see yore hand before yore face."

Brite got his heavy coat, which had served as a pillow, and while putting it on he advised the drivers to don their warmest.

"Reddie Bayne!" yelled Texas.

No answer! Joe yelled again, with an unnecessary peevishness, so Brite thought. Still no sound came from Reddie.

"Must be daid. Never knowed Reddie to be hard to wake."

"I heah hawsses," spoke up Deuce.

Soon Brite followed the others out from under the shelter into the yellow light of the lanterns. Brite was about to go over to awaken Reddie when a pounding of hoofs preceded a dark, ragged bunch of horses coming into camp.

"Heah she is! Doggone!" Deuce Ackerman called.

In the windy gloom Brite espied Reddie on foot, leading half a dozen horses by halters. The long slicker glistened wet in the lantern light.

"Where'd yu get them hawsses?" queried Texas.

"I had them tied oot heah."

"Ahuh. So yu can see in the dark, same as a cat?"

"Yes, sir," replied Reddie meekly.

"Wal, I shore hate to admit it, but yu beat holler any hawss wrangler I ever seen," concluded Texas gruffly.

"Thanks, Jack," returned Reddie sweetly.

They bridled and saddled the horses. Texas mounted, and calling for one of the lanterns he headed away from the wind.

"Deuce, yu fetch the other lantern," he called. "Moze, hang right heah till we come back. Have a fire an' hot drinks, for we'll shore need 'em."

Brite and the others followed, soon to catch up with Texas. The horses were unwilling to go and rubbed close together. Texas lifted his lantern.

"Thet's Reddie's black, ain't it?" he queried sharply.

"Yes, I'm heah," replied Reddie.

"Wal, yu go back to camp. This won't be no job for little girls."

"Jack, yu go where it's hot. I can stand the cold."

"Stop callin' me Jack," he retorted testily. "Or I—I'll box yore ears. An' I tell yu to stay in camp."

"But, Texas, I'd be afraid in camp withoot yu-all," she returned seriously.

"Wal, come to think of thet, I reckon yu're right. Deuce, where'n hell air we haidin'?"

"Darned if I know. I shore had a time findin' camp. Took me half an hour."

"How far oot was the herd?"

"Coupla miles, I reckon."

"Spread oot to the right, Deuce. An' go till yu can just see my light. Rest of yu hang in between— Hell, but it's nasty!"

A stiff wind was blowing at their backs. It carried fine rain and sleet, that could be distinctly heard by the impact and the rustling in the grass. The darkness appeared inky-black. And Texas's lantern shone fitfully upon weird spectral figures of horses and riders. When they had covered a distance of two or three miles Texas and Deuce began to yell to locate the guards with the herd. No answering yells rewarded them. They went a couple of miles farther, and then the line, with Texas at one end and Deuce at the other, began to sweep in a circle. The situation grew serious. If the herd took to drifting badly, the few guards could not hold them, and they might stampede, or at least travel many miles. Mossy-horns were as limber and enduring as horses when they wanted to go.

"Hold on, fellers," ordered Texas at last. "I heahed somethin'. Mebbe it was only a coyote. But I'll pile off an' get away so I can heah shore."

Leaping off, he stalked apart from the horses, his light swinging to and fro in his hand. Then he pealed out a stentorian yell. Brite listened, but could hear nothing. After a short silence Texas called: "Yep, I was right. I got an answer."

He hurried back to his horse, and mounting, led somewhat to the left. "Reckon I cain't keep thet direction long. But we'll stop an' yell till we locate them."

By this method Texas Joe found the other guards and the herd at last. But the guards were on the far side of the herd, which was drifting with the wind. Texas called for Brite and Reddie to follow him, and for the others to follow Deuce, who would circle the herd from his end. Time and time again Texas's light fell upon stragglers of the herd, evidently far behind the main body.

"Wal, the drags air good for somethin'," said Texas. "An' thet in a storm."

Answering yells became frequent and louder. Soon Texas led his followers round in front of the herd, where they encountered Panhandle and Rolly Little.

"How aboot yu, Pan?" shouted Texas.

"They're driftin', Tex, but not bad," came the reply.

"Where are the other boys?"

"Sometimes near, sometimes far. Now I can heah them an' again I cain't."

"Oh, ho, ho! Oh, ho, hell!" sang out Texas. "Line up all. Take yore medicine, Boss. Yu will buy cattle at twelve bits a haid! Reddie, heah is where we make a man oot of yu."

The drivers faced the wind and the oncoming herd. A bawling mass of cattle showed a square front to Texas's lantern. They were not ugly and probably could have been wholly halted but for the crowding from behind. Back a hundred yards, the light and the yells and singing of the drivers had little effect. So there was no hope of stopping them. The best that could be done was to retard their advance, to prevent a

possible stampede, and give way before them.

It was slow, tedious, discouraging work, not without considerable risk, and wearing to weariness and pain. The wind blew harder and colder; the sleet cut like tiny blades. Brite had always been susceptible to cold. The hour came when his heavy gloves and coat appeared to afford no protection to the storm. He could scarcely endure to face the sleet, yet he had to do it or be run over by cattle. Necessarily the action of his horse had to be slow, seldom more than a walk, and this was not conducive to active blood circulation. Reddie Bayne stayed with him, so near that they could locate each other without yelling.

"Cheer up, Reddie, the mawnin's aboot to bust," yelled Ackerman, the last time he rode by.

Almost imperceptibly the dawn came, revealing a dreary rangeland, and a dragging herd under a low-sailing bank of clouds, and bowed and sodden riders, stuck in their wet saddles. To turn the herd back became imperative. A day lost might mean loss of hundreds, even thousands, of cattle. Texas drove the weary riders to incredible exertions, concentrated at one end; and by hard riding, shooting to take the place of voices gone, he turned that end and the rest followed, as sheep follow a leader. Cattle and drivers then faced the north. The reluctant herd could not be driven faster than a plodding walk. Heads down, weary and hungry, the mossy-horns covered ground like snails. The horses, except Reddie Bayne's black, were spent, and would be useless the remainder of that drive.

Sometime during the afternoon Brite recognized landmarks near camp. He saw the *remuda* apparently intact and none the worse for the storm. Texas Joe and Ackerman left the herd bunched on a square of rich grass and, cutting out some horses, they drove them into camp.

Brite was not the last by two to ride in. Panhandle, haggard and drawn, came after him, and finally Bender, who sagged in his saddle. He had to be lifted off his horse. Moze was dealing out hot drinks. Brite wondered what would have been the outcome if no fire or reviving whisky had been available.

"Boys, the herd's shiftin' a little south," remarked Texas anxiously. "But I reckon we can hang them heah. Sabe, yu come with me. Deuce, send oot two men in an hour, an' we'll come back fer grub. After thet regular guard, an' we'll bed down heah tonight."

"Wonder if any herd's gained on us today?" asked Brite, speaking with difficulty.

"Reckon all the drivers back lost as much as us, Boss— On second thought, dose Bender up good an' put him to bed." As another afterthought Texas halted as he passed Reddie beside the fire and queried, "Say, kid, yu want any orders from me?"

"Kid! Who air yu addressin', Mister Jack?" retorted Reddie.

He fixed piercing hawk eyes upon her ruddy face. "Don't call me Jack no more."

"All right—Jack."

"I hate thet name. It reminds me of a girl who used to call me by it. She was 'most as uppish as yu, Reddie Bayne."

"I just cain't remember to say Joe. Besides, I like Jack best," said Reddie, with a roguish look in her eye. Still she did not look at Texas.

"Listen. Thet settles yu," he flashed,

with something of the ringing note in which he had addressed Wallen. "I cain't spank yu anymore, much as yu deserve it. I ain't hankerin' for any more lead. But yu'll shore call me Jack somethin'-or-other before this drive ends."

"Jack somethin'-or-other! What?" exclaimed Reddie very curiously.

"Wal, it might be Jack darlin'," replied Texas, and wheeled away.

The boys howled merrily. Reddie for once looked squelched. It was not the heat of the fire that added the crimson to her face. Brite caught a glimpse of her eyes before she lowered them, and they had a look of startled surprise. But her disheveled head did not long stay drooping; it bobbed up with a toss of curls, the action of a spirited girl strange to see in one wearing rough and muddy male attire.

"Never on this heah green earth!"

The night was long and uncomfortable, both in camp and out on guard. But the morning brought slowly clearing weather, and by the time the herd was pointed there was promise of sunshine. Wet grass and frequent pools of water made an easy day for the stock, a fact Shipman took advantage of with a long drive until dark. No droll repartee around the campfire that night!

Two more uneventful drives brought the outfit to Austin, the first settlement on the Trail. Brite halted to see a rancher who lived three miles or less out of town, and got disturbing news about conditions to the north. The usual run of disasters multiplied! But particularly the Colorado River, which ran by Austin, was flooded to its banks, and there would be a necessity of waiting to use the customary ford or go up the river and swim the herd. When Brite passed this information on to Texas Joe he received a reply to his liking: "Wal, we shore won't hang aboot thet burg."

Austin, like other settlements along the Chisholm Trail, was subject to fluctuations of populace, and sometimes it was just as well for a driver not to be sociable. In the second place, cowboys usually looked upon red liquor at such places, always a deterring and uncertain factor.

Texas gave the place a wide berth, aiming to strike the river five miles west, where Brite's rancher informant claimed there was a good gradual slope to point the herd across. Brite rode into Austin alone. He ate supper at a lodging-house, where he had stopped before, and then went downstreet to call at Miller's store. In the darkness, where so few lights flickered here and there, it was difficult to tell whether Austin was full of men or not. It appeared quiet and lonely. Miller, a gaunt Missourian, greeted Brite cordially, as became him toward a customer.

"Been lookin' for you," he said. "How close are the herds behind?"

"Wal, there's one a day or so," replied Brite. "In a week they'll be comin' like buffalo."

"So Ross Hite reckoned."

"Hite. Is he heah?" asked Brite casually.

"Yes. He rode in a few days back,"

returned Miller. "Had a bunch of mustangs he's been sellin' around."

"How many in Hite's ootfit?"

"Can't say. Only couple of men, strangers to me, with him when he came in here. Didn't he pass you on the way up?"

"There was some ootfit went by. Aboot seven or eight, I reckon. Somebody said it was Wallen's."

"Wallen? Don't know him. Well, the more outfits comin' the better I like it. And I ain't curious or particular."

Brite left orders for a pack of supplies, tobacco for the riders and sundries for Moze, and while these were being filled he strolled out to enter Snell's saloon. It was a big barnlike place full of light, blue smoke, odor of rum, and noise. He had been in Snell's on each drive north, and all the other times together had not totaled the number of inmates present on this occasion. Gambling games were in progress, and at one of the rude tables sat Ross Hite with other gamesters, all obsessed in their play. Brite gazed sharply to see if he recognized any of the other faces. But the light was poor and many faces were in shadow. He had not a doubt, however, that all of Wallen's outfit were there.

Cowboys, as Brite knew them, were conspicuous for their absence. The majority consisted of rugged, matured men; the minority, Mexicans and a few Negroes. Brite gravitated to a corner where he was in shadow and could watch all of the gamblers and one corner of the bar. He was just curious and thought he might happen on some chance talk. Ranchers, as a rule, did not spend their evenings in gambling-halls. Nevertheless, Brite thought he knew the inveterate cattlemen well enough to identify a few present. He had been there scarcely longer than a half hour when he was chagrined to see Roy Hallett and Ben Chandler come in.

Chandler was red-faced and manifestly jocose, but Hallett looked more than usually somber. They sat down at an empty table, where Hallett began a low and earnest talk with his partner. It was not pleasing for Ben to listen. More than once he essayed good-humoredly to get up, but could not escape. Then he showed indications of sullenness. Hallett was plainly trying to persuade him into something. It might have been more drinking, or gambling, or staying in town all night, but somehow Brite leaned to neither of these. Presently Ben spoke out quite clearly: "I'm damned if I'm gonna go through with it!"

There was that in his hard look, his angry tone, which warned Brite to interrupt this colloquy. Only on the very moment he saw Ross Hite give Hallett a meaning glance.

"Want to sit in for a spell? Two-bit limit," called Hite.

"Don't care if I do," replied Hallett. "Come on, Ben, le's skin 'em."

"I'm rustlin' back to camp," declared Ben, rising.

Hallett seized him, and pushing a fierce red face close to Ben's he hissed something inaudible but that was none the less forceful to Brite for that. Chandler reacted with like fierceness, which led, after a short tussle to free himself, to a lunge and a swing. He knocked Hallett flat, and then crouched, his hand on his gun. But his caution appeared needless. Hallett was not senseless, though he recovered slowly. Chandler glared from him to the gaping Hite, then wheeling, he hurried out of the saloon. Hite spoke in a low tone

to one of his associates, a thick-necked, heavy-visaged man, who rose and hurried out after Chandler.

Hallett got up and joined Hite at the gaming-table, with his hand to his face. He glowered malignantly at the door, as if he expected Chandler to come back. Hite sat shuffling the cards and talked low to Hallett. They had conversed before. Hite dealt cards all around, as if a game were in progress. But the watchful Brite saw that this was only a blind. It ended presently with Hite and Hallett going to the bar, where they drank and left the saloon.

Brite was in a quandary. Some deviltry was stirring. He wanted to hurry out and warn Chandler that he was being followed. On the other hand, he did not care to risk encountering Hite and Hallett. Uncertainty chained him for a few moments, then realizing that he must get out of the place, he pulled his sombrero down and made a break for it. The street appeared dark and empty. The few lights accentuated the blackness. Upon walking down toward the store to call for his purchases, he caught a glimpse of Hite and Hallett crossing the flare from the open doorway. Brite slunk into the shadow off the road. The two men went by, talking low. The listener could not distinguish their words; nevertheless, their tone was subtle, calculating.

When they had re-entered the saloon Brite went on to the hitching-rail to find his horse. He did not feel safe until he was astride in the middle of the road, headed for the upriver trail. He kept keen lookout for Chandler, to no avail. Once he thought he heard the beat of hoofs. Soon he had gained the open range out under the starlight. He had much to ponder over on the way to camp.

Chapter Seven

River Crossing

BRITE awoke with a start. It seemed as if he had not lain there more than a moment. Daylight had come. He heard the ring of an ax. But that hardly had awakened him. Rolling over to face camp, he sat up.

Hallett sat astride his horse, his sullen countenance betraying recent signs of dissipation. Panhandle and Deuce Ackerman stood by the fire, facing the others. Then Brite espied Texas Joe glaring at the rider. Evidently words had already been exchanged.

"An' where the hell have yu been?" queried Joe.

"Rode to town last night. Didn't mean to stay all night, but I did," replied Hallett coolly.

"Yu didn't ask me if yu could get off."

"Nope. I just went."

"Ahuh. So I see. Wal, it'll aboot cost yu yore job," drawled Texas.

"Shipman, I don't take much store in this job nohow."

Ackerman made a passionate gesture and stepped forward. "Roy, what's got into yu lately?" he demanded.

"Nothin' 'cept a little rye. I'm fed up on this job, Deuce. Too many steers an' too few drivers."

"Why'n hell didn't yu *say* so? I'm responsible for yu. I picked yu oot for this drive."

"Wal, yu ain't responsible for me no more," replied Hallett rudely.

"By thunder! I had a hunch yu'd—"

"Shet up, Deuce," interposed Texas curtly. "I don't hold yu responsible for Hallett. An' I'll do the talkin'."

"Aw, talk an' be damned. Yu're pretty windy, Shipman," returned Hallett sarcastically, as he lighted a cigarette.

"Shore. An' I may blow on yu if yu keep slingin' yore gab so free. Looks like yu want to quit this job."

"I'd just as leave."

"Wal, yu're off. An' now I'll tell yu somethin'. It's a dirty mean deal yu're givin' Mr. Brite. We're short of hands. An' yore deal has a queer look."

"Has it? Yu ought to know Texas is the place for queer deals."

"Yes, an' for yellow cowhands, I'm ashamed to say," rejoined Shipman, his gaze fixed in piercing intensity upon the rider.

Hallett slid off his horse. His face was lowering and his eyes shone like dull coals.

"There's more'n one yellow cowhand in this ootfit," declared Hallett. "An' I'm gonna tell yu what'll make yu take water. It was Ben Chandler who got me to go in town last night. He had some queer deal on. But I didn't know thet then. I went just for fun. An' I stayed to keep Ben from double-crossin' this ootfit. An' I couldn't do it."

"Ahuh," ejaculated Texas, unconvinced, but certainly checked.

Brite meanwhile had pulled on his boots, and now he arose, meaning to interject a few pertinent words into this argument. But he did not get very far. Ben Chandler stalked into their midst, wearing a bloody scarf round his head.

"Tex, he's a goddam liar!" he announced.

"Where yu come from?" queried Texas, astounded.

"My bed's over there in the bushes, Tex. I just crawled oot an' happened to heah this confab."

Hallett's appearance and demeanor underwent a drastic change. He first showed complete astonishment and incredulity. These gave way to deeper emotions, sudden anger and fear and hate.

"So *yu* turned up, hey?" he queried scornfully. "I'll bet yu don't remember yu was drunk last night?"

"Not me, Hallett."

"Huh. I reckon yu'll say yu wasn't in a fight, either."

"I wasn't. Somebody bounced lead off my haid, all right. I rode oot to camp, as yu see, an' now, by Gawd! I'm gonna come clean with what I done an' what I know."

"Shipman, this cowhand was so drunk last night thet he cain't remember shootin' up Snell's place."

Brite stepped out from behind the group. "Tex, I was in Snell's last night. I saw Hallett an' Chandler there. Ben was not drunk."

During the moment of silence that ensued Hallett's face turned a pale, livid hue. He crouched a little, as if about to spring, and with a hand at each hip he slowly edged toward his horse. His mask was off. His motive was to escape. But he looked venomous.

"Shipman, yu squawk again an' I'll bore yu," he rasped, his eyes deadly.

Texas swallowed hard, but he kept a cool silence.

"Bah, yu wouldn't bore nobody," shouted Ben Chandler passionately. "Yu're a bluff an' a liar, an' I'm gonna give yu away right heah," he shouted stridently. "I don't stand for yore dirty deal bein' laid on me."

"Hold yore chin, Chandler," hissed Hallett.

"Hold nothin'. I'm givin' away yore deal with Ross Hite. I'm—"

"Take it then!" As Hallett rang out those words he jerked at his guns. Out

they leaped and were flashing up when a heavy shot cracked from behind Brite. Smoke and fire burned his cheek. Hallett's intense action ceased as if he had been struck by lightning. His left eye and temple appeared blotted out in blood. He sank down as if his legs had telescoped under him, his face rooting in the dust, his hands sliding forward, lax and nerveless, to release the guns.

"Boss, I cain't stand around an' see yore good boys bored," Smith's cool, vibrant drawl broke the strained silence.

"So help me—Gawd!" burst out Ackerman excitedly. "He got it. I was leery aboot him."

"Panhandle, I'd forgotten yu was aboot," declared Brite in excited relief. "Thet was wal done— I saw Hallett with Ross Hite last night."

"Ben, come clean with yore story," ordered Texas Joe. "Yu damn near got yore everlastin' then."

"Texas, yu were in line, too. I saw thet in his eye," said Smith dryly.

Chandler sagged on a pack and dropped his head into his hands.

"Boss, there ain't much to tell," he replied in a low voice. "Hallett got around me. Persuaded me to go in with him on a deal with Hite. One night back on the Trail Hite got hold of Hallett when he was standin' guard. Offered him five hundred to leave a breach in the line so Hite an' his ootfit could cut oot a big bunch of stock. First, I—I agreed. I shore was yellow. But it rode me day an' night—thet lowdown deal. An' when it come to the scratch I—I weakened. I couldn't go through with it. Thet's all, sir."

"My Gawd, Ben! To think yu'd double-cross us like thet!" exclaimed Deuce Ackerman, wringing his hands. "I never knowed Hallett very good. But *yu*, Ben—why, we've rode together —bunked together for years."

"It's done. I've told yu. I'm makin' no excuses—only Roy always had likker to feed me," replied Ben miserably.

"Ben, in thet case I forgive yu," spoke up Brite feelingly. "An' I hope to heaven yu never fall down thet way again."

"Thanks, Mr. Brite. I promise yu—I won't," replied Chandler brokenly.

Just then Reddie came tearing up, her big black horse swinging with his beautiful action. She made the drivers jump before she pulled him to a halt.

"Mr. Brite—Texas—Panhandle," she panted, her eyes wide with excitement, "I've shore got news. Nichols with his herd of two-thousand-odd haid is right on our heels. An' followin' him close is Horton in charge of a big herd for Dave Slaughter."

"Thunderation!" ejaculated Brite, throwing up his hands.

Texas Joe used language equally expressive, but hardly for a young girl's ears. Then he pulled on his boots, a task that made him struggle.

"Both drivers sent a man over to tell us to hop the river pronto or they'd be on our heels," went on Reddie, her cheeks aglow. "Oh! Look at the river! It was dark when I went oot. Mr. Brite, it cain't be possible to swim our ootfit across thet flood."

"Reddie, it may not be possible, but we must make the attempt," replied Brite.

"Ah-h!" screamed Reddie, suddenly espying the bloody-faced Hallett on the ground. "What's—happened? Isn't thet Roy?"

"I reckon 'tis, lass."

"Oh! He's daid!"

"So it would seem."

"*Who?*" flashed Reddie, plainly

stirred to righteous wrath.

"Reddie, I'm the bad hombre," drawled Panhandle.

"Yu—yu bloody gunman! Why on earth did yu shoot thet poor boy?"

Panhandle turned away; Texas dropped his head; Brite watched, but spoke no word. Then Ben looked up.

"Why, Ben! Yu shot too?"

"Only a scratch, Reddie. Yu see it was this way," he began, and bravely outlined his part in the tragedy, scoring Hallett mercilessly, but not sparing himself.

"Ben Chandler!" she cried in shocked voice. Then as the realization dawned on her and she gazed from Texas to Brite, to the ghastly Hallett, and back with blazing eyes to Ben, the enormity of such an offense seemed to mount prodigiously.

"Yu agreed to double-cross our boss!" she burst out in withering scorn. "To steal from the hand thet paid yu! Lord! but thet's a low-down trick!"

"Reddie, I've overlooked Ben's break," interrupted Brite.

"Ahuh. Wal, all I say is yu're a lot of soft melonhaids," replied Reddie, with passion. "I'll never overlook it. An' I'll never speak to him again or stand guard near him or—"

"Come an' git it while it's hot," sang Moze.

Texas Joe was studying the river. It was two hundred yards wide at that point, a swirling, muddy, swift flood, carrying logs and trees and driftwood of all descriptions. The current had to be reckoned with. If it carried the stock below a certain point there would almost certainly be a disaster. For two miles below on the opposite side the bank was steep and straight up as far as the eye could see.

"Boss, I swear I don't know aboot it," said Texas. "But we cain't turn back now. The boys have their orders an' heah comes the herd in sight."

"We'll try it, win or lose," replied Brite grimly, stirred with the gamble.

"Hey, Reddie," yelled Texas, waving his hand. "Come on."

Reddie sent back a pealing cry and wheeled to ride behind the *remuda.* They came on in a bunch, restless and scared, though not wild. Panhandle rode below the taking-off slope while Texas rode on the upstream side. Reddie drove her mustangs down the slope on a run. Some sheered aside below and above, only to be driven back by Panhandle and Texas. In a moment more the leaders were pointed and with shrill snorts they plunged into the shallow river. The others followed in good order. Texas rode out with them until the water deepened perceptibly. He was yelling at the top of his voice. Panhandle shot in front of some mustangs leading out of line. Reddie, with her wild cries, drove them off the land, and when her black splashed the water high the leaders had gone off the bar and were swimming.

"Whoopee, kid!" yelled Texas, brandishing his sombrero. "Keep upstream yoreself an' let 'em go."

When Texas got back to the shore the rear and broad end of the *remuda* was well out, and the leaders about to hit the swift current.

"Tex, we ought to have gone with her," expostulated Panhandle seriously.

"Thet's a grand hawss she's forkin'," said Brite hopefully.

Texas Joe did not voice his fears or hopes, but he fixed his hawk eyes intently on that marvelous scene of action.

Whistling and rearing, the thickly-bunched body of ponies went off into deep water with the intrepid girl close behind, waving her sombrero and pealing her shrill cry to the skies. How her red-gold head shone in the sunlight! Once the black horse struck out into deeper water, Brite got rid of his fright. He could swim like a duck. Reddie kept him upstream to the left end of the bobbing line. Trees and logs floated into their midst, hampering the mustangs. Here and there one would fetch up to paw over the obstruction, slide off, go under, and come up to go on. Downriver swept those in the current, swiftly leaving those in the still water.

A mile below where Brite and his men watched breathlessly the leaders waded out into shallow water, and the long string curved faithfully toward that point. One by one, in twos and threes, and then in bunches, the mustangs struck the bar, to bob up and heave wet shoulders out, to flounder and splash ashore. Soon the wedge-shaped line thickened as the ponies passed the swift current; and it was only a matter of a few minutes before the last horse was wading out. And Reddie Bayne bestrode him!

"Doggone! Thet was great," breathed Texas.

"Shore was a pretty sight," agreed Panhandle.

"Wal, I reckon we had our fears for nothin'," added Brite.

"Boss, we ought to stop her. It's different comin' this way. Not enough room to allow for thet current," replied Panhandle anxiously.

"By Gawd, can yu beat thet!" exclaimed Texas, and whipping out his gun he shot twice. Then he waved his sombrero and yelled in stentorian tones: *"Go back! Go back!"*

Reddie heard, for she waved her hand in reply, and she kept coming on. In another moment her horse would be in over his depth, and the swift current, with big, muddy waves, right ahead of her. Texas shot all the remaining charges left in his gun, and he aimed so the bullets would hit the water not a great way below Reddie. Then he roared like a giant:

"Turn aboot!—Reddie, it ain't the same— Damn yu—I'm givin' orders!"

Reddie's high-pitched, pealing cry came sweet and wild on the wind.

"Too late, Tex. She's in now."

"Thet's a hawss, Brite. I say let her come," put in Panhandle.

Texas Joe became as an equestrian statue in bronze. The big muddy waves curled over the neck and head of the black, and up to the shoulders of the girl. They were swept downstream with a rush. But in a hundred yards the powerful horse had left the high waves and was entering the swirling, lesser current. Brite saw the girl check him to let a log pass, and again turn him downstream to avoid a huge mass of green foliage.

That horse and rider knew what they were doing. Again he breasted the current with power and worked across. But he would never make the point of bar where the *remuda* had taken off. This worried Brite. Only so few rods below where the high bank began! Already Panhandle was riding down to head her off. The black, however, was coming faster than the watchers had figured. His lean head jerked high, his wet shoulders followed and with a lunge he was out of the depths into the shallows. He had made it with room to spare. Reddie came trotting ashore.

Here Texas got off his horse, and in

the very extreme of rage or exasperation or something, he slammed his sombrero down, he stamped to and fro, he cursed like a drunken cowhand. Plain it was to Brite that his foreman had surrendered to the release of pent-up agony.

Soon Reddie rode up to rein in before Texas and Brite. She was something to gaze at. Pale with suppressed excitement, her eyes large and dark and daring, she sat awaiting sentence to fall. She was wringing wet to her neck. Her blouse no longer hid the swelling contour of her breast.

"Sorry I scared yu, gentlemen," she said a little fearfully. "But yu need me over heah an' I had to come."

"Reddie Bayne, I yelled to yu," began Texas sternly.

"Shore. I heahed yu."

"I ordered yu back. Did yu heah *thet?*"

"Course I did. Laws! yu'd woke the daid."

"Wal, then, yu have no respect for me as trail boss of this drive?"

"I wouldn't of turned back for Mr. Brite himself," retorted Reddie spiritedly. But her face had paled and her eyes were dilating.

"Yu disobeyed me again?" thundered Texas.

"Yes, I did—dammit."

"Reddie Bayne, yu listen. Just 'cause yu've got the boss eatin' oot of yore hand—an 'cause yu're the distractin'est pretty girl—an' 'cause I happen to be turrible in love with yu, don't make no damn bit of difference. Yu're wearin' driver's pants, yu're takin' driver's wages, yu're pullin' driver's tricks."

Texas stepped over to her horse, and flashing a lean, brown hand up, like a striking snake, he clutched the front of her blouse high up and jerked her, sliding, out of her saddle.

"Oh-h," cried Reddie in a strangled voice. "How dare— Let me go! Texas, wha—what air yu goin' to—"

"I cain't slug yu one as I would a man—an' I cain't spank yu no more as I once did," said Texas deliberately. "But I'm shore gonna shake the daylights oot of yu."

Then he grasped her shoulders and began to make good his threat. Reddie offered no resistance whatever. She was as one struck dumb and helpless. Brite grasped that Texas's betrayal of his love had had more to do with this collapse than any threat of corporal punishment. She gazed up with eyes that Texas must have found hard to look into. But soon she could not see, for he shook her until she resembled an image of jelly under some tremendous, vibrating force. When from sheer exhaustion he let her go she sank down upon the sand, still shaking.

"There—Miss Bayne," he panted.

"Where—Texas Jack?" she gasped flippantly.

"Gawd only knows," he burst out helplessly, and began to tear his hair.

"Heah comes the herd!" rang out the thrilling word from Panhandle.

Chapter Eight

Big Steal

THE old bull, Mossyhorns, huge and fierce, with his massive horns held high, led the spear-shaped mass of cattle over the brow of the long slope. Densely packed, resistless in slow advance, they rolled like a flood of uprooted stumps into sight.

"By all, thet's lucky!" yelled Texas in elation. "Pointed already! If they hit the river in a wedge like thet they'll make Moses crossin' the Red Sea only a two-bit procession."

Drivers on each side of the wedge rode frantically forward and back, yelling, shooting, waving. But the noise they made came faintly through the din of bawls.

"Reddie," called Texas earnestly, turning a stern, tight-lipped face and falcon eyes upon the girl, "this heah's new to yu. Yore hawss is a duck, I know, but thet won't save yu if yu get in bad. Will yu stick close to me, so I can tell yu if yu start wrong?"

"I shore will," replied Reddie with surprising complaisance.

"Boss, yu hang to their heels," concluded Texas curtly. "Pan, yu drop back aboot halfway. Above all, don't drift into the herd— Come on, Reddie!"

Texas plunged his horse into the river ahead of Mossy-horns, swinging his lasso round his head and purple in the face from yelling. Reddie's big black lashed the muddy water into sheets as she headed him after Texas. Then the great wedge, like an avalanche, hit the shallow water with a tremendous sound. Hundreds of cows and steers had reared to ride on the haunches of those ahead, and the mass behind pushed all in a cracking, inextricable mass. But those to the front, once in the water, spread to find room. Herein lay the peril of the drivers, and the dire necessity of keeping the herd pointed as long as possible.

Across the backs and horns Brite espied Ben Chandler on the downstream side of the herd, close to the leaders, and oblivious or careless of danger. Bent on retrieving his fatal error, he had no fear. Soon Brite lost sight of Ben's bloody, bandaged head in the flying yellow spray. Try as he might, he could not see the reckless driver again. San Sabe and Ackerman, both on the downriver side, slowly gave ground toward the rear of the herd, intending to fall in behind as soon as the end passed. Rolly Little, Holden, and Whittaker passed Brite in order, fire-eyed and gaunt with excitement.

As Brite gazed spellbound, the wide rear of the herd, in crashing momentum, rolled past his position. It was time for him to join the drivers. He spurred ahead, and the mustang, excited and fiery, his blood up, would have gone anywhere. Brite had one last look out into the current, where a thousand wide-horned heads swept in a curve down the middle of the river. Then he leaped off the bank and into the water, just even with the upriver end of the herd.

In a maelstrom of swishing water and twisting bodies the broad rear of the herd smashed off the bar. Magically then all sound ceased. There was left only a low, menacing swish and gurgle of current against Brite's horse. Easily he took to deep water, and Brite felt at once that he had drawn a river horse. What wonderful little animals, those Spanish mustangs of Arabian blood!

To Brite's right the three drivers were working their horses away from the herd, or so it appeared to him. Then Brite saw San Sabe point up the river. A mass of driftwood was coming down on the crest of a rise. What execrable luck to be met by a heavy swell of flood and current in the middle of the river at the most critical time! Brite reined his mustang to avoid the big onrush of driftwood. With hands and feet he pushed aside logs and branches.

A whole tree, green and full-foliaged, surrounded by a thick barrage of logs, drifted right into the middle of the swimming herd. This the drivers were unable to prevent. They could only save themselves, which in the case of two of them, at least, was far from easy.

The swift-floating island of debris split the herd, turned the rear half downstream, and heralded certain disaster. Brite saw the broad lane between the two halves, one quartering away toward the north shore, the other swimming with the current. If it kept on downriver it was doomed.

An eddy caught the mustang and whirled him around and around. Brite was about to slide off and ease the burden, but the horse tore out of the treacherous whirlpool and, thoroughly frightened, he redoubled his efforts. Brite's next discovery was sight of the vanguard of cattle wading out on the wide bar below. Already two of the riders were out. Grateful indeed for so much, Brite turned to see what had become of the endangered half of the herd. They were milling back toward the center of the river. This amazed Brite until he heard the *boom-boom-boom* of a heavy gun. Chandler, the daredevil, must be on the other side there, driving the cattle again into the current.

The milling circle of horned heads struck into the swift current, to be swept on down the river, past the wading vanguard, surely to slide by that steep corner of bank, beyond which could lie only death. Brite could stand the loss of stock. But a rider sacrificed hurt him deeply. He had never lost one until this drive. Still he clung to hope. Somewhere down around the bend, on one bank or the other, there might be a place for Chandler to climb out of the water and reach safety.

At this juncture Brite saw another rider, one of the three ahead of him, wade his horse out and go across the bar at a gallop, to mount the bank and ride swiftly along its edge, the mane and tail of the mustang flying wildly in the wind. He did not recognize either Texas's or Panhandle's horse, so that rider must have been Ackerman, speeding to give aid to Chandler.

When Brite at last waded out on the bar there were only a few hundred head of stock behind and below him. They were wearied, but safe, as all had found footing. Three riders were waiting. Texas and Reddie had vanished. Bender, Panhandle, and San Sabe were working out behind the cattle, and all three were facing downriver, no doubt watching the cattle that had been swept away.

Presently Brite joined the six drivers on the bar and encountered a disheartened group of cowboys. Panhandle was the only one to present anything but a sad countenance.

"Mr. Brite, we had bad luck," he said. "The herd split in the middle an' the back half went downriver, taking Chandler with it. Our good luck is thet more of us might have been with him."

"Hell with—the cattle!" panted Brite. "Any hope for Chandler?"

"Shore. He's a gamblin' chance to get oot somewhere. But I wouldn't give two bits for the cattle. Ackerman is ahaid, keepin' up with them. Texas followed with Reddie."

"What'll we do?"

"Make camp heah on the bank in the grove. Plenty of grass. The stock shore won't move tonight."

They rode up the sandy slope to a level bank of timber and grass, an ideal place to camp. The horses were

heaving after their prolonged exertions. "Get off an' throw yore saddles, boys," said Brite, suiting action to his words. "Somebody light a fire so we can dry oot."

A little later, while Brite was standing in his shirt sleeves before a fire, Texas Joe and Reddie rode into camp.

"We cain't send good money after what's lost," he said philosophically. "I reckon Ben is gone, an' there's only one chance in a thousand for thet bunch of cattle."

"Poor Ben," said Reddie. "If he's lost I'll never forgive myself. I—I was mad an' I said too much."

"Wal, yu shore said a heap," drawled Texas. "If yu'd said as much to me I'd drowned myself pronto."

"Don't—don't say it—it might be my fault," wailed Reddie, almost weeping.

"No, kid. I was only foolin', Ben was just makin' up for the wrong he did us. An' he's shore square with me."

"Oh, I hope an' pray he got oot," rejoined Reddie as she dismounted.

While the others stood around the fire, Texas and San Sabe rode back across the river to help Moze get the chuck wagon across. Brite had his doubts about the venture, and when horses and wagon struck off the bar into deep water, he feared more misfortune. But the wagon floated so high that part of the bed and all the canvas showed above water. It sailed across like some strange boat.

Texas brought back word that the herd following would bed down on the south shore for the night and cross in the morning. It was too close for comfort, but nothing could be done about it.

Presently Deuce Ackerman rode into camp, haggard of face and covered with mud. He all but fell out of the saddle, and it was some time before he could speak. Finally he began:

"Wal, I rode along the bank an' ketched up with the cattle. An' there was thet idjit Chandler hangin' along the leads, slappin' his rope ahaid of him. He hadn't given up pointin' thet bunch of longhorns to this shore. I yelled an' yelled my lungs oot, but he never heahed me. After a while, though, he seen me. I waved him oot of the river an' he paid no attention. He kept on, the herd kept on, an' so did I. I'd run a coupla miles, I reckon, before I ketched up. An' we wasn't long travelin' another mile or so. Then I seen far ahaid on my side a wide break in the bank. Damn if Chandler hadn't seen it, too. An' he lashed them lead cattle like a fiend from hell. He beat them farther an' farther to this side. An' I'm a son-of-a-gun if he didn't work 'em over to shore just when the current had carried 'em to this break. The water close in was shallow, too. Once the leads hit bottom they come to life, an' my! how they swarmed off thet bar!"

"Yu mean to tell us Ben drove them cattle oot on dry land?" demanded Texas incredulously.

"Damn if he didn't! But his hawss was all in, an' on account of the cattle blockin' his way he couldn't get oot of deep water. So he was carried on downriver, past the break. I rode on for all I was worth, yellin' to Ben to hang on. By this time he was on his hawss's neck. But for the current, thet little hawss would have sunk. He could hardly swim a lick. I seen where the swift water run close under the bank, an' I made for thet place. Shore enough, Ben swept in close, an' I jumped off with my rope. Fust throw I hit Ben clean with my loop. But it was too

small. It didn't ketch, an' he missed it. I kept runnin' an' throwin', but no good. The bank was awful steep an' crumbly. Then I broke off a section an' damn near fell in myself.

"Seein' thet wasn't gettin' us nowhere, I run ahaid a good ways an' waited for Ben to float by a likely place. But jest as they was aboot to come within reach of my rope the game little pony sunk. Ben made a feeble effort to stay up. He seen me. He opened his mouth to call—only a gurgle! His mouth filled—an' the water come up over his bloody face. My Gawd! There he floated, a hand up, then his back, his haid onct more—an' thet was the last."

Reddie burst into tears and ran from the campfire. Texas knelt to throw bits of wood upon the coals.

"Ross Hite or no—Ben shore paid for his fling," he muttered to himself.

"Ackerman, thet was a turrible thing," declared Brite, badly upset.

"'Most as tough on me as Ben," said the cowboy huskily. "I'll never forget his eyes. At the last he wanted to be saved. I seen thet. When I first come up to him he didn't care a damn. All he wanted was to get the haid of thet string of cattle pointed to land. An' he done it. Never did I see the like of thet."

Texas rose dark and stern. "I'll get me a hawss an' ride down to locate thet bunch. How far, Deuce, aboot?"

"I don't know. Four miles, mebbe."

Shipman trudged wearily away, despite Brite's call for him to rest a while longer. Perhaps Texas wanted to be alone, a disposition more than one of the drivers soon manifested. Reddie had evidently hidden in the green brush. Being a woman, she would take this tragedy hardest to heart, believing she had been partly to blame.

The hot fire dried Brite's clothes and made him drowsy. Lying down in the sand under a tree, he fell from rest to slumber. Upon awakening Brite was chagrined to note that the sun was westering. Panhandle, Reddie Bayne, Rolly Little, and Texas were in camp, a stone-faced quartet. The other drivers were gone.

"Ha, Tex, yu back?" queried Brite, sitting up with stiffened joints.

"Yeh, Boss, I'm back," replied the cowboy wearily.

"How far's the split half of the herd?"

"Wal, countin' the half hour I been heah, I'd say aboot ten miles to the north'ard."

"Wha—at?"

"Shore, an' travelin' to beat hell!"

Brite sensed more tragedy, and braced himself to continue coolly: "How come?"

"Boss, I plumb hate to tell yu," rejoined Texas miserably. "Reddie, clap yore hands over yore ears. I gotta let go! Of all the ——— ——— ——— luck any ——— ootfit ever had we've had the wust. I'm seein' red. I'm madder'n any rattler-bitten coyote yu ever seen. I gotta get pizen drunk or kill—"

"Hell! yu're not *tellin'* me anythin'," interrupted Brite testily.

"Tell him, Pan."

"Mr. Brite, it's an unheahed-of deal an' I'm not agreed with Texas aboot its bein' so bad as he reckons," complied Panhandle. "Texas rode oot to get a line on thet split herd an' couldn't see it nowhere. So he rode up a high ridge an' soon spotted yore cattle. They was travelin' north at a good lick in front of aboot ten drivers."

"Ross Hite!" thundered Brite in a sudden rage, leaping up.

"So Tex reckoned. An' as was right

an' proper, he rode back to tell us. We been havin' a powwow aboot it. Tex was riled somethin' fierce. He wanted to take fresh hawsses an' ride oot to shoot up thet stampedin' gang of Hite's. So did all the boys except me. I was against thet an' the more I reckon the stronger I am set."

"I agree with yu, Panhandle," rejoined Brite at once. "We air let down. If we chase Hite an' pick a fight, win or lose, some of us air goin' to get killed. An' we leave what's left of my herd heah to mix in with the herds comin' behind. No! Let's stick with the bird in the hand."

"By all means," agreed Panhandle with satisfaction. "Now if yu follow me on thet maybe yu'll see what I see. Ross Hite cain't get so far ahaid thet we cain't ride him down in a day. Let him go. Keep close on his trail aboot a day behind. He's drivin' our cattle for us. But he's the damnedest fool in this range. There's no sale for cattle short of Dodge. He'll take thet branch of the Chisholm Trail, because it's much farther to Abilene. An' the night before we expect him to ride into Dodge I'll take a fast hawss, cut off the trail, an' be there to meet him."

"Boss, it's a good idee, except Pan wants to go it alone, an' I won't stand for thet," interposed Texas.

"Meet Hite?" echoed Brite.

"Thet's what I said," concluded Panhandle tersely.

"Wal, Pan, on the face of it, thet's hardly fair to yu," replied Brite ponderingly. He understood perfectly. Panhandle Smith chose to attempt this single-handed. It was the way of the real gunman to seek the dramatic, to take advantage of the element of surprise, to subject no other to risk than himself.

"Boss, on second thought I stand by Pan," spoke up Texas. "But thet's the last way to get our cattle back. Shorer'n Gawd made little apples somethin' else will turn up. We got a dozen more rivers to cross, an' redskins to meet, an' buffalo. Buffalo by the million! This hombre Hite is no trail driver. His ootfit air a lot of hawss thieves, some of them gray-haided. They cain't drive cattle. Hite is plumb loco. He reckons he'll clean up aboot thirty thousand dollars. An' thet'll hold him to the trail an' the herd. He's got no more chanct to get thet money than a snowball has in hell!"

Chapter Nine

Indian Sign

THE night fell warm, with a hint of summer in its balmy sweetness; the stars shone white through the foliage of the trees; the river gurgled and murmured along the shore, without any of the menace that it had seemed to have by day; the frogs trilled lonesome music. And all the vast range was locked in silence and slumber. Yet even then thieves and death were at work.

Brite felt all this while trying to woo sleep. But it would not come. Reddie had made her bed near him in the shadow of the heavy bushes. Presently a tall, dark form stalked between Brite and the pale starlight. Texas Joe was roaming around camp, as usual, in the dead of night, perhaps about to call change of guards. But he stealthily went around Brite to halt beside Reddie, where after a moment he knelt.

There followed a moment of silence, then Reddie murmured, drowsily:

"Huh? Who is it?"

"Ssssh! Not so loud. Yu'll wake the boss up—it's only Tex."

"Yu again! My Gawd! man, cain't yu even let me sleep?" returned Reddie in a disgusted whisper.

"I heahed yu cryin' an' I wanted to come then. But I waited till everybody was sunk."

"What yu want?"

"I'd like to talk to yu a bit. Never have no chance in daytime. An' since I run into Ben sittin' beside yore bed one night I haven't had no nerve."

A long silence followed. Brite had a desire to cough or roll over, or do something to acquaint the young couple that he was awake. He had also a stronger desire, however, not to do it. The river murmured on, the frogs trilled, the leaves rustled. There seemed to be something big and alive and wonderful abroad in the night.

"Wal, thet all yu wanted to say?" resumed Reddie.

"No. I always have a lot to say. An' I cain't say it," whispered Texas sadly. "I feel awful sorry aboot Ben. He was no good, Reddie. I've knowed thet for some time. But he shore died grand."

"Don't make me cry again."

"Wal, did Ben ask yu to marry him?" he questioned.

"Land sakes, no!" exclaimed Reddie with an embarrassed little laugh.

"It's not so funny. Haven't any of this ootfit asked yu?"

"Not thet I heahed, Texas," replied Reddie, almost with a titter.

"Wal, I mean to ask yu! But I must tell yu somethin' fust."

"Yu're talkin' mighty strange, Texas Jack!"

"Yu're forgettin' aboot thet Texas Jack handle. I've warned yu— Reddie, I've got to tell yu. Since way back on the trail I've knowed yu was a girl. Before I killed Wallen. Do yu reckon I could have shot him so quick—if I hadn't known?"

"Damn yu! I'm scared. How'd yu know?"

"Reddie, yu remember thet creek bottom where we camped? Prettiest camp so far. Willows an' pecans an' blackberries an' flowers hangin' over thet clear creek. It was aboot sunset. I'd been below an' took a short cut to camp. The brush was awful thick. I heahed a floppin' aboot in the water an' I sneaked up to peep through the green."

"Yu—yu— Tex Shipman!" she cried in a low, strangled voice.

"Yes. I seen yu bathin'—only seen the—the upper part of yu. Don't be so awful ashamed, Reddie—just one peep —then I fell down an' laid there as if I was shot. Then I crawled away— After thet I was never the same."

"I—I should think not! But why did yu ever tell me? Yu're no gentleman—an' I do hate yu now!"

"Wal, I cain't help thet. But I don't believe yu, Reddie. There's no sense or justice in hatin' me. For Gawd's sake, why?"

"Yu've been so mean to me."

"Mean! Say, I had to fool everybody. I had to keep yu an' all our ootfit from findin' oot I'd gone plumb, starin', stark mad aboot yu. So I picked on yu."

"Tex Shipman—thet time yu spanked me—did yu know I was a girl then?"

"So help me Gawd—I did."

"Now! I'll never look at yu again."

"But, Reddie, don't yu want a man to be honest?"

"Not—not when he knows too much."

"I had to tell yu thet before I could

ask yu to marry me. An' I'm doin' thet now."

"Doin' what?" she flashed in a full, thrilling whisper.

"Askin' yu to marry me."

"Oh, indeed! Yu think I'm a pore waif of the range? No kin, no home, no friends. Jest an ootcast."

"Yu come to us a pretty lonely kid, if I recollect. Reckon yu've had a tough time. I shore wonder how yu got through so good an' fine a girl."

"Yes, it is a wonder, Texas. But I did, thank Gawd. An' now I'm the happiest girl alive."

"Reddie! Has my askin' yu to—to be my wife—has thet anythin' to do with how yu feel?"

"Wal, it's a satisfaction, Tex," she replied demurely. "Cowboy, yu don't know how high yu're aspirin'. I *was* a waif but *now* I'm an heiress!"

"What? Yu're a locoed kid."

"Texas, I'm Mr. Brite's adopted daughter!" she announced proudly.

"*Aw!* Honest, Reddie?"

"Cross my heart. I don't know how it all come aboot. I don't care. I only know I'm happy—the first time in my whole life!"

"Doggone! I'm shore glad. It's aboot the best thet could happen to yu. The boss is a fine old Southern gentleman. A real Texan. He owns a big ranch ootside Santone. Yu'll have a home. Yu'll be rich some day. Yu'll have all the hawsses any girl could set her heart on —an' beaux, too, Reddie!"

"Beaux? Oh, dear! How—how funny! Me, Reddie Bayne, heah sleepin' in my overalls!"

"Yep, an' them beaux mean Tex Shipman an' all his gun-totin' breed can go hang. But no one of them will ever love yu so turrible as Tex Shipman."

"Faint heart never won fair lady, Texas Jack," she taunted.

Then followed a sudden low thump, a convulsive wrestling, and the soft sound of a kiss.

"Oh! Don't—yu—yu—"

"I *told* yu," he whispered passionately. "I warned yu—an' now I'll get even. I swore once thet if yu didn't quit callin' me Texas Jack I'd make yu call me Jack darlin'. An' I'm shore goin' to."

"Yu *air* not," flashed Reddie with heat. But she was frightened.

"I shore am."

"If yu try thet again I—I'll scream."

"I'll bet yu won't. I'll risk it, anyway."

"Texas, yu're hurtin' me, yu big brute. Don't press me down so hard—Yore hands— Ah-h!"

"There! Now say Jack darlin'—or I'll kiss you again."

"I—won't—I won't—I—"

A tense interval elapsed, significant with faint straining sounds.

"Wal, I had to take two—then. My Gawd! I'm ruined! I never knowed what a kiss was. Now yu can hold off sayin' Jack darlin' as long as yu want."

Evidently she fought fiercely for a moment, to judge by the commotion, then she gasped and gave up.

"Please, Tex—this is no way to treat a girl— Oh-h!"

"I can do thet all night," replied Texas, his full whisper poignant and rich. "Air yu goin' to say Jack darlin'?"

"But, man, thet won't mean nothin'!" she exclaimed wildly.

"Very wal." And he kissed her again and again. Brite heard the slight, sibilant, thrilling contacts of lips.

"Oh!—yes—yes—I give—in," she found voice to say. "Let me—breathe!"

"Not till yu say it. Pronto now, unless—"

"Devil! Jack—dar-lin'!"

"Thanks, Reddie. An' heah's one for givin' in! Next time yu'll ask *me*."

Evidently he released her and sat up, breathing hard.

"I'm sorry to offend yu. Yet I'm glad, too," he said, no longer in a whisper. "'Cause yu're oot of a pore trail driver's reach now, Miss Reddie Bayne Brite. Yu been kissed an' yu called me darlin'. Thet'll have to do me all my life."

He stood up. His tall, dark form crossed the pale starlight glow under the trees.

"But I didn't mean it—Texas Jack!" she ended, in a whisper that was not comprehensible to Brite. Manifestly it was no more comprehensible to Texas, and vastly provocative, for he rushed away like the wind into the darkness.

By sunup the drivers were on the trail again, but a different spirit prevailed. These drivers reacted visibly to betrayal by two of their number, to the death of the traitor, to the ordeal of the flood, and Chandler's fate. Loss of half their herd had made them grim and stern. Instinctively they all began to save themselves, as if what had happened was little compared with what was to come.

But Round Top and Brushy Creek camps, and Cornhill, Noland Creek, Loon River, Bosque River, were reached and passed with only minor mishaps. Once from a swell of the vast prairie, which had taken them all day to surmount, San Sabe pointed out the stolen half of Brite's herd, only a long day ahead. They knew for a certainty now that Ross Hite was driving those cattle. At Belton, a little ranch settlement on Noland Creek, Hite had left behind enough to identify him.

At Fort Worth disturbing information was elicited. A detachment under Lieutenant Coleman of the Fourth Cavalry was on the way to Fort Richardson, where a massacre of settlers had been perpetrated by Comanches not long before. Comanches and Kiowas were on the warpath again and raiding all the wide territory between the Brazos and Red Rivers. Buffalo herds were to be encountered frequently south of the Red, and north of it, according to Coleman, were packed almost solid clear to the Canadian River. Beef and hide hunters, rustlers and horse thieves, were also following the buffalo.

"Lieutenant Coleman advises you stay at the fort for a while," concluded the sergeant. "There's only one herd ahead of yours. An' that outfit wouldn't listen to reason."

"Ross Hite's ootfit?"

"Didn't get the name. Tall sandy-complexioned Texan with deep slopin' lines in his face an' narrow eyes."

"Thet's Hite," confirmed Panhandle.

"He'll run plumb into everything this range can dig up. You'd better hold up for a spell."

"Impossible, Sergeant," replied Brite. "There air two big herds right behind us. One an' two days. An' then six days or so more there's no end of them.

Two hundred thousand haid of stock will pass heah this summer."

"My God! Is it possible? Well, a good many of them will never get to Kansas. Good-by and good luck."

"Same to yu," called Texas, and then turned to his outfit with fire in his eyes. "Yu all heahed, so there's nothin' to say. We'll go through shootin'. Boss, I reckon we better load up with all the grub an' ammunition we can pack. No store till we get to Doan's, an' they're always oot of everythin'."

Brite's outfit of drivers went on, prepared for the worst. And again they had days of uneventful driving. At Bolivar, a buffalo camp, the Chisholm Trail split, the right fork heading straight north to Abilene, and the left cutting sharply to the northwest. The Abilene branch was the longer and safer; the Dodge branch the shorter, harder, and more hazardous, but ended in the most profitable market for cattle and horses.

Texas bedded down the herd near a small stream. Then he and Panhandle rode into Bolivar to find out, if possible, which fork Hite had taken. They returned before supper was ready, with smiles on their faces.

"Wal, Boss, Hite took the Dodge trail yestiddy aboot noonday," said Texas cheerfully. "He's ahaid of us right smart, but accordin' to them buff hunters he'll be stuck in no time."

"Wal, thet's good news, I guess," replied Brite dubiously. "What yu mean —stuck?"

"Wal, if nothin' else stops Hite the buffalo shore will."

"Then they'll stop us, too."

"We don't give a damn so long's we get our cattle back. Thet Hite deal shore went against the grain for me."

Toward the close of their supper two strangers approached in the dusk. Texas greeted them, thereby relieving Brite's concern. The visitors proved to be hide hunters stationed at Bolivar.

"We been lookin' over yore herd," announced the taller of the two, undoubtedly a Texan. "An' we want to inform yu thet Hite's cattle wore two of yore brands."

"No news to us. But yore tellin' us makes a difference. Much obliged. It happened this way," rejoined Texas, and related the circumstances of the fording of the Colorado and loss of half the herd.

"Then yu needn't be told no more aboot Ross Hite?" queried the hide hunter in a dry tone.

"Nope. Nary no more."

"Wal, thet's good. Now heah's what Pete an' me come over to propose. We want to move our ootfit up somewheres between the Little Wichita an' the Red, whar we heah thar's a million buffs. An' we'd like to go with yu thet fer."

Texas turned to interrogate his boss with a keen look.

"Men, thet depends upon Shipman," returned Brite. "We shore could use more hands, if it comes to a mess of any kind."

"Wal, I'd like to have yu, first rate," said Texas frankly. "But we don't know yu. How can we tell yu ain't in with Hite or have some deal of yore own?"

"Hell no, yu cain't tell," laughed the hunter. "But yu've got guns."

"Shore; an' yu might spike 'em. Tell yu what I'll do, fellers." Texas proceeded leisurely to replenish the fire, so that it blazed up brightly in the gathering dusk. Standing in its glare, the two visitors showed to advantage.

"Reddie, come heah," called Texas. "These two men want to throw in with us, far as the Little Wichita. If yu was trail boss of this ootfit, what would yu

say? Would yu let 'em come along?"

"Gee! give me somethin' easy," retorted Reddie, but she came readily closer, sensing an importance in the event. And certainly no two strangers ever received any sharper, shrewder survey than they got then.

"Howdy, lady. Do yu know Texans when yu see them?" queried one quizzically.

The shorter of the two removed his sombrero to bow with Southern politeness. The act exposed a ruddy, genial face.

"Evenin', Miss. If it's left to yu I'm shore we'll pass," he said frankly.

"Texas, I've seen a heap of bad hombres, but never none thet I couldn't size up pronto. Guess it got on my mind. If I was foreman I'd be glad to have these men."

"Wal, thet was my idee," drawled Texas. "I only wanted to see what yu'd say."

"What yu got in yore ootfit?" asked Brite.

"Two wagons an' eight hawsses, some hides an' grub. An' a box of needle-gun ammunition."

"Thet last may come in handy. But I understood from my foreman thet there was six in yore ootfit."

"Thet's correct. But Pete an' me want to pull leather away from them, an' not answer any questions, either."

"All right. Yu're welcome. Be heah at daybreak. An' say, what's yore handles?"

"Wal, my pard goes by the name of Smilin' Pete. An' mine's Hash Williams. Much obliged for lettin' us throw in with yu. Good night. See yu in the mawnin'."

Next morning, two hours after the start, a dust devil, whirling down into the herd, stampeded them. Fortunately, it was toward the north. The drivers had nothing much to do save ride alongside and keep the herd bunched. They ran ten miles or more, in a rolling cloud of dust and thunder before they slowed up. It was the first stampede for Brite that trip, and was unfavorable in that it gave the herd a predisposition to stampede again.

Texas Joe drove on until the chuck wagon and the two hide hunters caught up, which was late in the day.

That night at the campfire the trail drivers compared notes. San Sabe had seen smoke columns rising above the western hills; Ackerman and Little reported buffalo in the distance; Brite thought he noted an uneasy disposition on the part of all game encountered; Reddie had sighted a bunch of wild horses; Panhandle averred he had spotted a camp far down a wooded creek bottom.

Texas apparently had nothing to impart, until Reddie tartly said, "Wal, Hawkeye, what're yu haid of this ootfit for, if yu cain't see?"

"I wasn't goin' to tell. I shore hate to do it— I seen two bunches of redskins today."

"No!" they chorused, starting up.

"Shore did. Both times when I was way up front, an' had first crack at the hilltops. Country gettin' rough off to the west. We're nearin' the Wichita Mountains. I shore had to peel my eyes, but I seen two bunches of Injuns, aboot two miles apart. They come oot on the hilltops. Might have been only one bunch. They was watchin' us, yu bet, an' got back oot of sight pronto."

"*Comanches!*" cried Reddie, aghast.

Chapter Ten

Raiders

EVERY day's travel was fraught with increasing suspense. Tracks of Indian ponies, old campfires in the creek bottoms, smoke signals from the hilltops, and lean wild mustangs with half-naked riders vanishing like specters in the distance—these kept the Brite contingent vigilant and worried all the way to the Little Wichita.

Ordinarily it was a small river, easily forded by stock. But now it was a raging torrent, impassable until the freshet had gone by. That might take a day or longer. A short consultation resulted in a decision to find a protected swale or valley where grass would hold the cattle and timber would afford cover for the trail drivers in case of attack.

The drivers of the herd ahead of them, presumably the one stolen by Ross Hite, could not have crossed, and no doubt had gone up the river with the same idea Texas Joe had decided upon. Buffalo were everywhere, though only in scattered bunches in the river bottom and along the grassy slopes. Up on the range it was probably black with them.

Texas sent San Sabe down the river to reconnoiter and he proceeded up the stream for a like purpose, leaving the rest of the drivers to tend to the stock.

The hour was about midday, hot and humid down in the protected valley. The stock rested after days of hard travel. All the drivers had to do was sit their horses and keep sharp lookout. Most of the attention was directed to the low brushy rims of the slopes. Texas had driven off the trail half a mile to halt in the likeliest place, which was good for the cattle, but not so good for the drivers, as they could be reached by rifle shot from the hills. The three wagons were hauled into the thickest clump of trees. It looked like a deadlock until the river went down. Smiling Pete and Hash Williams, the hide hunters, climbed under cover of the brush to scout from the hilltops. The trail drivers held their rifles across their saddles. Brite had two, the lighter of which he loaned to Reddie. Armed to the teeth, alert and determined, the drivers awaited events.

Reddie called to Brite that she heard a horse running. Brite made signs to the closest rider and then listened intently. Indeed, Reddie's youthful ears had been right. Soon Brite caught a rhythmic beat of swift hoofs on a hard trail. It came from downriver and therefore must be San Sabe. Also Brite heard shouts from the slope. These proved to come from the hide hunters. Panhandle and Ackerman evidently heard, for they rode around to join more of the drivers. Then in a bunch they galloped to a point outside the grove where Brite and Reddie were stationed.

"It's San Sabe," shrilled Reddie, pointing. "Look at him ride!"

"Injuns after him, I'll bet," added Brite. "We want to be huntin' cover."

Soon they were surrounded by Panhandle and the others. San Sabe reached them only a moment later.

"Injuns!" he shouted hoarsely, and he reined in. "But they ain't after me. They didn't see me. Haven't yu heahed the shootin'?"

No one in Brite's company had heard

shots. "Wal, it's down around thet bend, farther than I reckoned. I was goin' along when I heahed yellin' an' then guns. So I hid my hawss in the brush an' sneaked on foot. Come to a place where hawsses had just rid up the bank oot of the river. Sand all wet. They was Injun ponies. I follered the tracks till I seen them in an open spot. Heahed more shots an' wild yells. The timber got pretty thick. Takin' to the hillside, I sneaked along under cover till I seen what the deal was. Some settlers had made camp in a shady place, no doubt waitin' to cross the river. I seen three wagons, anyhow, an' some men behind them shootin' from under. An' I seen Injun arrows flashin' like swallows, an' I heahed them hit the wagons. Then I sneaked back to my hawss an' come a-rarin'."

"Brite, we'll have to go help them," replied Panhandle grimly.

"How many redskin ponies?" queried Hash Williams in businesslike tones.

"No more'n twenty—probably less."

"How far?"

"Half mile aboot below the bend."

"Boys, halter a couple of hawsses for Pete an' me. Don't take time to saddle."

"What's all the confab aboot?" queried a cool voice. Texas Joe had come up behind them to dismount, holding his bridle in one hand, rifle in the other. San Sabe gave him the facts in few words.

Then Hash Williams spoke up. "Shipman, I'm takin' it yu'll go pronto to the rescue?"

"Hell yes! Have yu any plan? Yu're used to redskins."

"We'll split, soon as we leave the hawsses. Come on. We might get there too late."

San Sabe led off down the trail at a canter, followed by the drivers, except Texas, who waited a moment for the hunters to mount bareback. One mustang threatened to buck, but a sharp blow from Texas changed his mind. Soon the trio overtook the others, and then San Sabe spurred his horse into a run. Brite did not forget Reddie in the excitement. She was pale, but given over to the thrill of the adventure rather than to the peril. Brite would not have considered leaving her behind with Moze. The cavalcade rounded the river bend, stringing out, with Brite and Bender in the rear. San Sabe soon halted and, leaping off, led into the timber on the right of the trail. Brite and Bender came up just as Reddie was following Texas on foot into the woods. They tied their horses in the thick brush at the foot of the slope. Heavy booms of buffalo guns, and the strange, wild, staccato yells of Indians, soon sounded close.

"Comanches," said Williams grimly.

Presently San Sabe parted the bushes. "Heah's their ponies."

"Less'n twenty. Wal, they're our meat, boys," replied Hash Williams as his dark eyes surveyed the restless, ragged mustangs, the river bottom beyond, the densely wooded slope, and lastly the rugged rim, with its prominent crag standing up like a sentinel. The place was small and restricted. To Brite the slope appeared to curve below into a bluff sheer over the river.

"Shipman, keep Pete heah with yu, an' choose five men to go with me," said Williams swiftly.

"What's yore idee?" flashed Texas, his hawk eyes roving all around, then back to the hunter.

"If I can git above these red devils they're our meat," replied Williams. "Most of them will have only bows an'

arrers. They'll crawl under the brush an' be low along the slope. Strikes me there ain't enough shootin'. Hope we're not too late. When we locate them an' let go, it's a shore bet they'll run for their hawsses. Yu'll be hid heah."

"Ahuh. Thet suits me. I see where we can crawl within fifty feet of them Injun mustangs an' be wal hid. All right. Yu take San Sabe, Ackerman, Whittaker, an' Little."

"Boys, throw off spurs an' chaps, an' follow me quiet."

In another moment the five men had disappeared and only soft steps and rustling could be heard. Texas peered keenly all around the glade where the mustangs had been left.

"Come on, an' don't make no noise," he whispered, and slipped away under the brush. Holden followed, then Smiling Pete, then Bender and Panhandle, after which went Brite with Reddie at his heels. Shrill yells occasionally and an answering boom of a needle gun augmented the excitement. Texas led to a little higher ground, at the foot of the slope, and on the edge of the glade, where broken rock and thick brush afforded ideal cover.

"Heah we air," whispered Texas to his panting followers. "Couldn't be better. We'll shore raise hell with them redskins. Spread along this ledge an' get where yu can see all in front. When yu see them wait till we give the word. Thet's all. Keep mighty still."

The Indian mustangs were haltered to the saplings at the edge of the glade. What a ragged, wild-eyed bunch! They had nothing but halters. These they strained against at every rifle shot. And more than a few of them faced the covert where the drivers lay in ambush. They had caught a scent of the whites. Heads were pointed, ears high, nostrils quivering.

Suddenly the noonday silence broke to the boom of guns. Fast shooting, growing long-drawn-out, then desultory. Brite saw Texas shake his head. Next came a series of blood-curdling yells, the hideous war cry of the Comanches. Brite had been told about this —one of the famed facts of the frontier —but he had never heard a Comanche yell till now.

"By Gawd! They've charged thet wagon train," ejaculated Pete hoarsely. "Williams mustn't hev located them."

"He can do it now," replied Texas.

All at once the whoops and piercing yells were drowned in a crash of firearms.

"Ho! Ho! Listen to thet! Gawd! I hope they were in time! Now, men, lay low an' watch. It'll be short now. The Comanches will be comin' in a jiffy, draggin' their wounded. They won't stop to pick up their daid—not in the face of thet blast."

The shooting ceased as suddenly as it had commenced. Hoarse yells of white men took the place of the Comanche war-cry. Cracklings of dead snags came faintly to Brite's ears.

"Men, they're comin'," said the hunter, low and hard. "Wait now—mind yu —wait till they get out in the open!"

Brite gripped his rifle and attended to the far side of the glade and the shadowy forms under the trees. The foremost ones flitted from tree to tree, hiding, peering back. Lean, bronze devils—how wild they seemed! Four or five flashed into plain sight, then disappeared again. Swift footfalls, soft as those of a panther, sounded quite a little closer to the ambushers. Brite espied a naked savage stepping forward, his dark face turned over his shoulder, his long, black hair flying

with his swift movements. Reddie's gasp proved that she saw him, too. Then farther down the edge of the woods other Indians emerged into the sunlight. Two carried rifles, most of them had bows, but Brite saw no arrows. They made for the mustangs, peering back, making signs to others coming, uttering low, guttural calls. In a moment more, when several bucks had mounted their ponies, four or five couples emerged from the woods, dragging and supporting wounded comrades.

A warrior let out a screeching cry. No doubt he had seen or heard something of the ambushers. Next instant Reddie had fired at the nearest Comanche, halfway across the glade, facing back from the direction he had come. He let out a mortal yell of agony and stumbled backward, step after step, his dark face like a ghastly mask of death, until he fell.

Simultaneously then with fierce shouts the ambushers began to fire. The shots blended in a roar. Brite downed the Comanche he aimed at, then strove to pick out among the falling, leaping, plunging Indians another to shoot at. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Panhandle flip one gun out, aim and shoot, and then the other, alternately. He was swift yet deliberate. No doubt every bullet he sent found its mark. The wounded and terrorized mustangs tore away their halters, and scattered in every direction. The firing thinned out, then ceased, after which there followed a dreadful silence.

"Reckon thet's aboot all," drawled Texas Joe with a little cold laugh. "Load up quick. All down an' 'most daid."

"Thet first buck who yelled got away," replied Pete. "I missed him. But I didn't see no more. We shore dropped them pronto. I know I only bored one. Yu must have some daid shots in this ootfit."

"Tex, heah comes Williams an' our boys," shouted someone.

The hunter could be seen approaching hurriedly, yet warily, with several men at his heels.

"Hash, only one got away," called Smiling Pete. "We done 'em up quick an' brown."

"Good! But we was too late. Damn our souls!" boomed the hunter stridently. "Come along heah back with us."

Texas Joe and the others rushed after Williams, who had turned to follow the drivers with him. Brite and Reddie fell behind. The strip of woodland grew more open until it let sunshine into a little park where a camp had been established. Three wagons had been lined up to inclose a triangular space. The wheels had been barricaded in places with packs and beds. Indian arrows stuck out with ominous significance. In the foreground lay a white man on his face. An arrow head protruded from his back. His scalp had been half torn off.

"Pete, we slipped up as fast as we could," Williams was explaining. "But too late. I reckon we was in only at the finish."

Brite bade Reddie remain back while he followed the hunters. He had seen gruesome sights before, yet it was a shock to renew such experiences. Williams dragged two dead men from under the wagons, and then a third who was still alive. Evidently he had been shot, for no arrow showed in him. They tore open his shirt and found a bad wound high up, just about missing the lung. The bullet had gone clear through.

"Reckon this feller will live," said Williams practically. "One of yu tie a scarf tight over this hole an' under his arm. Search everywhar, fellers. This has been a pretty long scrap. Yu see the blood has dried on thet man."

"I know I seen a girl just as we bust loose on 'em," said Ackerman, sweaty and grimy, his face working. "There was two redskins chasin' her. I crippled one. Seen him go down an' crawl. Then the other grabbed him into the brush."

"Heah's a daid woman," called Texas Joe from the back of the third wagon. His comrades hurried to confirm this statement. Brite shuddered to see a woman, half stripped, hanging scalpless and gory half out of the wagon.

"Thet's not the girl I seen," shouted Ackerman. "I swear it, men. She was runnin'. She had light hair. She wore a plaid skirt."

"Wal, spread oot, some of yu, an' search," ordered Texas Joe.

But neither the wagons nor the brush nor the clumps of trees rewarded their hasty search. Deuce strode to the river bank, which was not far away, and thickly covered by willows. From here he called. Suddenly he gave a wild shout and leaped off the bank out of sight. Texas Joe and other drivers ran in that direction. Before they could reach the bank Deuce appeared, half supporting a light-haired girl. They all ran then to meet Deuce, and Reddie flew after them.

"There, little lady, don't be scared," Ackerman was saying as he halted with the girl. "We're friends. We've killed the Indians. Yu're all right."

He helped her to a log, where she sank down, and her head fell against his shoulder. She appeared to be about sixteen years old. Wide horror-stricken blue eyes gazed at the men. Freckles shone on her deathly white face.

"Lass, air yu hurted?" queried Williams anxiously.

"I don't—know. I guess—not," she answered faintly.

"How many in yore party?"

"Six," she whispered.

"There's one man alive. He has a black beard. Reckon he'll live."

"My father! Oh, thank God!"

"What's yore name?"

"Ann Hardy. My father is—John Hardy. We were on our way to Fort Sill—to join a wagon train there. The Indians had attacked us—for days—then left us. We had to stop—on account of the high water. They came back today."

"Is the woman yore mother?"

"No, sir."

"Wal, that's all now," concluded Williams. "Men, we better not lose any time gettin' this girl an' her father up to our camp. Some of yu rustle now. Take the girl. I'll stay with Pete, an', say, three more of yu. We'll do what we can for Hardy an' fetch him along. Then if all's well we can come back heah, bury the daid, an' look over this ootfit."

"I'll put her on my hawss," said Ackerman. "Come, Miss Hardy. Lean on me."

"You saved my life," she replied, and fixed strained eyes upon him. "I was just—about to jump into the river."

"All's wal thet ends wal," rejoined Deuce with a nervous little laugh. "Yu an' yore dad air lucky, I'll tell yu. Come. We have a girl in our ootfit. Heah she is—Reddie Bayne."

"Oh, yu pore dear!" cried Reddie, putting her arm around the girl. "But yu're safe now with us. This is Brite's ootfit. An' there's some hard fighters an' gunmen in it. Texas Jack an' Pan-

handle Smith an' Deuce Ackerman heah. All bad hombres, but shore good to have around when stampeders an' redskins come."

Deuce and Reddie led the girl up the trail, followed by Brite, Texas Joe, and the other drivers who were not going to stay with Williams. The trail ran between the river and the spot where the Comanches had met their doom. Texas and Holden forged ahead to get the horses. Deuce put the girl up on his saddle and mounted behind her. In a few minutes after that they reached a familiar grove of trees. But Brite did not recognize it.

"Wal, I'll be damned!" vociferated Texas Joe, suddenly halting.

"What ails yu, Tex?"

"Look aboot yu, Boss. Heah's camp an' our chuck wagon. But where's Moze—an' where's our hawsses an' cattle?"

"*Gone!*" screamed Reddie.

Chapter Eleven

Ambush

BRITE scratched his stubby chin. His two-thousand-odd cattle, less than half the original number he started with, had disappeared as if by magic.

"Wal, I'm not surprised," snorted Texas. "Boss, when I rode back from upriver awhile ago, San Sabe had just come in hollerin' Injuns. So I had no time to tell yu thet Ross Hite's ootfit was up there with the other half of yore herd."

"Damnation!" swore Brite. "Did they have the nerve to steal the rest of them? Right under our eyes!"

"Mebbe not. Longhorns air queer brutes. They might have just sloped off an' then again they might have stampeded. Shore they didn't come downriver."

"Where's Moze?"

"Heah, yu Alabama coon!" yelled Texas.

"I'se heah, Boss," came from the thick clump of trees, high up among the branches. "Heah I is."

Presently they heard his feet thud on the soft turf and soon he appeared, shuffling toward them at a great rate.

"Moze, what's become of our cattle?" demanded Brite.

"I dunno, suh. Jus' after yo-all left I seen some riders comin' down the ribber. An' dis chile perambulated up de tree. Pretty soon I heahed dem close, an' I seen dat long lean Hite man. I sho' did. They jus' rode behind de cattle an' chased dem at a run up de ribber. An' dey missed our hawsses."

"Ahuh. Now, Boss, we have no more trouble atall," drawled Texas. "Pile off an' soon as the rest of our ootfit gets heah we'll put our haids together."

Deuce unrolled a bed for the Hardy girl, and he and Reddie made her comfortable in the shade. Brite had the same thought he divined was passing in Reddie's mind—that the Uvalde cowboy had been shot through the heart by something vastly different from a bullet.

Texas walked out a few rods to look down the river. "The others air comin'," he announced, with satisfaction. "Now we'll soon see where we air."

While still some distance from camp, Williams, evidently missing the cattle, came on at a gallop.

"Whar's our longhorns?" he roared.

"Hite drove them off while we was fightin' the Comanches," replied Texas.

"Whole hawg or none, huh? I'd

a-reckoned he'd be smarter than to do thet."

"Williams, is it better or wuss for us?"

"Two times better, easy," declared the hunter. "I jest wonder what led to thet trick. Sort of stumps me."

"What'll we do?"

"Wal, we'll talk it over," returned Williams, dismounting. "But sight unseen I'd say let Hite go with the cattle. Foller him across the Red, anyway. He cain't dodge us. He cain't sell the stock. He cain't make a deal with the Injuns, for he couldn't get nothin' from them. An' they won't drive cattle."

Presently the approaching horsemen reached camp, two of them supporting the wounded settler, Hardy. He was conscious, but unable to sit up. They lifted him off the horse and carried him to a place beside his daughter.

"Oh, Daddy, say yu're not bad hurt," she cried.

"I'm all—right—Ann, so they tell me," he replied weakly.

"Dig up some whisky an' fix him a bed," ordered Texas.

"Brite, what'll we do aboot them wagons? I reckon we ought to take one of them an' a load of supplies. We seen two hawsses, anyway. We could haul Hardy an' his girl far as Doan's Store. What yu say?"

"I say yes, of course. Send two men back to fetch one wagon an' a load. We can cross this river with wagons as soon as the cattle can."

"Thet'll be tomorrer. River's goin' down fast. An' we'll camp right heah tonight. Thet'll give us time to bury them poor folks."

"Williams, don't yu reckon Hite will ambush the trail, thinkin' we'll be fools enough to chase him?" asked Texas.

"He'll do thet, shore. We ain't goin' to chase him. Mister Hite stole our herd too quick. We'll let him look oot for them an' we'll look oot for ourselves."

"Would yu advise me to scout up the river?"

"No, I wouldn't. But yu might send thet little chap, Sabe," replied Williams. "Heah, cowboy, yu climb the hill, keepin' oot of sight all the time. Work along the rim an' see if yu can locate thet ootfit. An' come to think of it, Shipman, let's hold off on sendin' anyone down after thet wagon ontil Sabe gets back with his report."

Panhandle sat apart, cleaning his guns. They glinted in the sunlight like polished steel. The gunman appeared absorbed in his task. His brow was corded and dark, the line of his cheek tight and gray. Brite calculated for a certainty that Smith had done away with half the bunch of Comanches. He gathered solace from that and pondered on the doubtful future of one Ross Hite.

Hours passed. Still San Sabe did not return. Toward sunset Williams deemed it advisable to get Hardy's wagon, horses, personal effects, and supplies up to Brite's camp before night. To this end he went himself, taking two men.

San Sabe hailed them from the bluff just as Moze called the outfit to supper. His call evidently was only to assure them of his safety, a fact Brite gave audible thanks for. He could not afford to lose any more drivers. In due time San Sabe burst out of the brush to approach the expectant group. His garb attested to rough work in this brush and his dark face was caked with sweat and dust.

"Had to haid a lot of canyons," he explained. "Thet accounts for me tak-

in' so long. Hite is drivin' the cattle, all one big herd again, up the river. He—"

"How fer's he got?" interrupted Texas.

"Aboot five miles from heah."

"Did yu get near enough to count his ootfit?"

"Shore. Seven drivers with the herd. An' one with their hawsses. They're shy of saddle hawsses. I counted six pack animals."

"Travelin' light. No chuck wagon. San, don't yu reckon they'll bed down thet herd pronto?"

"Lawd only knows. What does Hite care aboot cattle. He'll lose ten percent withoot accidents."

"He'll lose more'n thet," replied Texas thoughtfully. "Boss, what yu say to havin' the ootfit somewhere close when Hite drives thet herd into the river?"

"I say I'd like it," returned Brite emphatically.

"Wal, we all would. We'll plan to move pronto."

"Fetch in the team, somebody. An' round up the *remuda*. Tex, I reckon Williams will think of packin' the new wagon so Hardy can ride comfortable. An' the girl can ride on the front seat. Who'll volunteer to drive thet wagon?"

"I will," flashed Deuce Ackerman before the other boys could get in their vociferations.

Here Texas Joe interposed, cool and authoritative, his sombrero pulled well down. Perhaps only Brite saw the mischievousness in his eyes.

"Deuce, if yu don't mind, I'll drive thet wagon. Yu see we haven't any herd to point."

"But, Tex, yu cain't drive a team," burst out Deuce, almost in a wail.

"I cain't?"

"Yu told me so. Wal, I've drove teams all my life, since I was thet high. Besides, I'm not so—so darn well, an' I'm saddle-sore, an' off my feed—an'—"

"My Gawd! Deuce, yu need a doctor!" ejaculated Texas solicitously. "I hadn't seen how seedy yu look till now. Shore yu can drive the Hardy wagon."

This effected a remarkable transformation in Deuce. He grew radiant. The boys gazed at him in slow-dawning realization at his perfidy.

"Miss Ann, air yu able to ride hawssback?" asked Texas.

"Oh yes—I can ride anything," she replied earnestly. "Really, Mister Texas, I'm not hurt or sick. I'm getting over my scare."

"Wal, thet's fine. Then yu can ride hawssback with me. I have jest the pony for yu. A pinto thet come from Uvalde. He's Arabian if I ever seen one."

Deuce's face fell. He was wholly unconscious of the sincerity and depth of his emotions. Brite detected another reaction to this innocent fun Texas was having. Reddie betrayed signs of the green-eyed monster.

"An Arabian? Oh, I shall love to ride him," Ann replied with enthusiasm. "But I'd rather go on the wagon to be close to Daddy."

"Yu win, lady," retorted Texas with dry humor. Manifestly the fair sex was beyond him. Brite made certain that the girl had spoken the simple, natural truth. But that Texas cowboy had a suspicion that Ann wanted to ride beside her rescuer.

A little later the cowboys rode in from downriver, leading two saddle horses, and following them came a wagon with Williams and Smiling Pete on the seat.

Texas Joe lost no time acquainting the hunters with his eagerness to start

at once up the river, so that they could be on hand when Hite drove the herd across.

"Texas, great minds run the same," boomed Williams. "I had thet idee myself. What did San Sabe report?"

When this information had been briefly imparted he said, "Good! Send Sabe an' another rider up the trail pronto. An' we'll foller as soon as we can start."

Panhandle, Texas Joe, and Smiling Pete rode at the head of that caravan. Reddie Bayne and Brite drove the *remuda* next. Ackerman, at the reins of the Hardy wagon, with Ann on the seat beside him, came next. Whittaker was prevailed upon by vast argument and some anger to handle the third wagon. Moze followed with his chuck wagon, and Hash Williams, accompanied by Less Holden and Bender, brought up the rear.

The hours passed. It was after midnight when Texas rode back to halt the *remuda* and then the wagons as they came up.

"We heahed cows bawlin' ahaid," he said. "An' I reckon we're just aboot too close for comfort now. What yu say, Williams?"

"Wal, let's haul up heah while some of yu sneak ahaid on foot. I'll go along. Texas, it ain't so long till mawnin'. An' we shore want to be around when Hite's ootfit drives the herd across."

"Hash, we *want* the cattle to get over," replied Texas forcibly. "Thet'll save us work. An' we oughtn't begin hostilities until the rear end is halfway across."

Brite was pulled out by Texas Joe in the gray of dawn. "Boss, I just rode back with the news. Hite is crossin' the herd," he whispered. "If yu don't want to miss the fun, come on. Don't wake Reddie. We're leavin' five men heah. An' we'll be back before sunup."

"Don't wake Reddie!" spoke up that young person derisively. "Fine chance yu have of keepin' me from seein' the fun, Texas Jack."

"Say, yu must want to be kissed some more," drawled Texas coolly.

"Shore do. But not by the same gentleman—I mean hombre—who kissed me last."

"Gosh! Who was thet lucky hombre?" laughed Texas, and went his way.

Brite had been swift to comply with his foreman's suggestion, and had only to snatch up his rifle. Texas waited in the gray gloom with Panhandle, San Sabe, and Williams. Reddie joined them there, rifle in hand.

"Listen," whispered Texas. "Foller me an' keep still. Do what I do. The idee is to break up Hite's ootfit before it gets across the river. Most of his drivers, yu know, will be behind the herd. When they get all in the river then we gotta do some tall shootin'. Thet's all."

He set off up the trail at a swift stride. The others followed in single file. San Sabe brought up the rear. Texas did not stop until he got around a bend in the river. He listened. The bawl of cattle arose on the still, warm air. Brite calculated that they could scarcely be more than a mile—two at the most—from the crossing Hite had chosen.

The valley had widened. On the opposite side of the river the rim of the bluff sloped down to a distant break. Soon Texas led off the trail into the woods. Here going was impeded by brush until they emerged upon the sandy bank of the river. It was wide

here and shallow, flowing on with a gurgle and murmur. Judging by the wet sand and weeds, the water had dropped several feet during the night. By this time broad daylight had come, but not under a clear sky as usual. Hazy clouds presaged rain.

Texas hurried along, keeping in the lee of willows, halting to listen every hundred paces or so. At length he turned a corner to stop with a low: "Listen! Look!"

Half a mile beyond, the wide river space presented a wonderful spectacle. It appeared to be blotted out by a great mass of moving cattle that extended across, and out on the opposite bank, and up under the trees. The herd had not been pointed by expert trail drivers. Brite did not see a rider. They would be, of course, on the upstream side, if the water was swift and deep. All the cattle were wading, which insured a safe, though slow crossing.

"We gotta rustle," Texas whispered fiercely. "We didn't get fer enough up an' they're quarterin' away from us. Spread oot an' crawl to the edge."

Before Brite, who encountered a tangle of willows, could reach the open, the thundering boom of needle guns dinned in his ears. He rushed ahead, split the willows with his rifle, and peered out. Reddie slipped in a few feet to his right.

The wide rear of the herd was a full hundred yards out. Half a dozen riders were beating and spurring their horses in a mad haste to escape. Brite saw horses down and one man pitching in and out of the water.

"Aim low an' shoot, Reddie," he called harshly, yielding to the fight-lust of the moment. Then he tried to cover the rider of a plunging horse, and fired. In vain! Guns were banging on each side of him, until his ears appeared about to crack. The last rider, whose horse was crippled, threw up his arms and lunged out of his saddle into the water. He did not come up.

Puffs of white smoke from the retreating drivers told of a return fire. Bullets began to splatter on the water and sand, and to whistle by into the willows. But the danger for Brite's men appeared negligible, owing to the fact that the thieves were shooting with small arms from plunging horses. Only a chance bullet could find its mark. The swift water came up to the flanks of the horses, hindering progress on foot. It was not deep enough for them to swim. Nevertheless, the riders drew nearer the shore in a hail of bullets. This pursuing fusillade ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun, because Brite's men had exhausted all the loads in both rifles and revolvers.

The yelling, frantic robbers reached the land, five of them, where they joined one who had crossed ahead of them, and they surrounded him like a pack of wolves, no doubt cursing him for this attack. They pointed to three horses down, and one man floating, face up.

Texas, having reloaded his buffalo gun, took a long shot at them by way of farewell. The big bullet splashed water and sand in their faces, making them beat a hasty retreat into the willows.

"Wal, doggone!" ejaculated Texas, pleased as a child. "It turned oot better'n I hoped when we got heah. What yu say, Hash?"

"Not so good as I was hankerin' for. But not bad, either," replied Williams. "Thar's three hawsses down, an yu bet I didn't see no feller wade ashore."

"Let's rustle back to camp, eat, an'

get goin' 'cross this river," said Texas. "It'll shore be little sleep or rest Ross Hite will get from now on."

Chapter Twelve

Storm

BRITE'S outfit crossed the river at the same point where the rustlers had been routed. Ackerman rode out ahead, and came back at noon to report that the stolen cattle were less than ten miles ahead.

All afternoon the caravan gained, which fact was probably well known to the Hite outfit. At sunset Hite halted the herd on the open range. Scarcely half a dozen miles away Texas Joe ordered his outfit into camp at a little swale well.

The sun set in a red flare and dusk trooped up from the west, sultry and ominous. Dull rumbles of thunder heralded an approaching storm. After a short conference with Panhandle, Texas drew Brite aside.

"Boss, any kind of a storm tonight, if it'll only flash lightnin' enough, will shore suit me an' Panhandle."

"Tex! What's in yore mind?" queried Brite hastily.

"We're gonna get back our herd tonight."

"Yu an' Pan? Alone?"

"Shore alone. Thet's the way to do it. Pan wanted to tackle it by hisself, an' so did I. But we compromised by joinin' forces. We're goin' together."

"Shipman, I—I don't know thet I'll permit it," rejoined Brite gravely.

"Shore yu will. I'd hate to disobey yu, Mr. Brite. But I'm trail boss. An' as for Panhandle, hell! Thet feller cain't be bossed."

"What's yore idee, Tex? I hope to heaven it ain't crazy. Yu an' Pan air grown men. An' yu shore know yore responsibility heah. Two young girls to protect now, an' a crippled man."

"Wal, the idee strikes yu wuss than it really is," went on Texas. "Pan an' me plan to strike the herd in the thickest of the thunder an' lightnin'. When we do I'll circle it one way an' he'll circle the other. If the cattle stampede, as is likely, we'll ride along an' wait till they begin to mill or stop. Now Hite's ootfit will be havin' their hands full. They'll be separatin', naturally, tryin' to keep the herd bunched an' stopped. An' in a flash of lightnin', when any one of them seen us, he wouldn't know us from Adam. Savvy, Boss?"

"I cain't say thet I do," replied Brite, puzzled.

"Wal, yu're gettin' thick-haided in yore old age. Kinda gettin' dotty adoptin' this pretty kid, huh?"

"Tex, don't rile me. Shore I'm dotty, aboot her, anyway. But I don't get yore hunch. Now, for instance, when yu an' Pan circle thet herd, goin' in opposite directions, when yu meet how'n hell will yu know each other? Shootin' by lightnin' flash had ought to be as quick as lightnin', I'd say. How'n hell would yu keep from shootin' each other?"

"Wal, thet's got me stumped, I'll admit. Let's put our haids together after supper. Mebbe one of us will hit on just the idee. If we think up somethin' shore—wal, it's all day with Hite an' his ootfit."

Moze rolled out his familiar clarion blast.

"Gosh! this's fine, all heah together, first time," exclaimed Ackerman, whose spirits ran high. He had just

seated Ann on a pack beside him.

"Wal, it may be the last, so make the most of it," drawled Texas, his dark, piercing eyes upon Reddie. Brite saw her catch her breath. Then silence fell.

Dusk deepened into night, still close, humid, threatening, with the rumbles sounding closer and more frequent. In the western sky all the stars disappeared. The moon was not yet up.

"Chuck on some firewood an' gather aboot me heah," said Texas after the meal ended. "It's shore gonna storm pronto. An' me an' Pan have a job on."

"What?" bluntly jerked out Holden.

"Thought yu was kinda glum," added San Sabe.

"Reddie, yu're in on this," called Texas. "An' Ann, too, if she likes. Shore no one ever seen an idee come oot of a pretty girl's haid. But I'm sorta desperate tonight."

In the bright light of the replenished fire they all surrounded their foreman, curious and expectant.

"Wal, heah's at yu. Me an' Pan air ridin' oot to round up Hite. Soon as the storm's aboot to break we'll ride up on the herd an' the guards. I've got them located. We plan to circle the herd in different directions, an' we want to know ab-so-loot-lee when we meet each other. How we goin' to do thet?"

"Yu mean recognize each other by lightnin' flashes?" queried Less.

"Shore."

"It cain't be did."

"Aw, yes it can. A lightnin' flash lasts a second—sometimes a good deal longer. How much time do I need to see to throw a gun—or not?"

"Oh-ho! Thet's the idee!"

"Lemme go along."

"No, it's a two man job. Use yore gray matter now, pards."

"It'll be rainin', most likely, an' the herd will be driftin', mebbe movin' fast. An' of course Hite's ootfit will be surroundin' it, all separated. It's a grand idee, Tex, if yu don't plug each other."

"Wal, let's see," put in another driver. "When yu separate yu'll know for sure yu cain't meet very soon. It'll take most a quarter or mebbe half an hour to trot around a big herd, guidin' by lightnin' flashes."

"Boys," drawled Panhandle, in amusement, "yore minds work slow. What we want to know is what to wear thet can be seen quick. Somethin' shore to identify each other. Remember we'll both be holdin' cocked guns."

One by one the male contingent came forward with suggestions, each of which was summarily dismissed.

"If it storms, the wind will blow, shore?" interposed Reddie.

"Breeze blowin' already. There'll be a stiff wind with the rain," replied Texas.

"Tie somethin' white aboot yore sombreros an' leave the ends long so they'll flap in the wind."

"White?" responded Panhandle sharply.

"Doggone!" added Texas.

"Men, thet is a splendid idee," interposed Brite earnestly. "Somethin' white streakin' oot! It couldn't be beat."

"Where'll we get this heah somethin' white?" asked Texas. "In this dirty ootfit it'd be huntin' a needle in a haystack."

"Ann has a clean white towel," replied Reddie.

"Yes, I have," said the girl eagerly. "I'll get it."

When the article was produced and

placed in Texas's hands he began to tear it into strips. "Wal, Reddie, yu've saved my life. I shore want this Panhandle galoot to make quick an' shore thet I'm Tex Shipman. Heah, we'll knot two strips together, an' then tie the double piece roûnd our hats. Come, Reddie, take it."

She complied, and when he bent his head she clumsily wound the long streamer around the crown of his sombrero. The firelight showed her face white as the towel.

"What yu shakin' for?" demanded Texas. "Anyone would get the hallucination yu reckoned I was gonna be killed an' yu felt bad."

"I would feel—very bad—Tex," she faltered.

"Wal, thet makes up for a lot— Tie it tighter, so the wind cain't blow it off. There, I reckon thet'll do. How aboot yu, Pan?"

"I'm decorated, too."

"Wal, I could 'most see thet in the dark. Now, fellers, listen. Like as not we won't come back tonight, onless our plan fails. If it works we'll be with the herd, yu bet. So yu rout Moze oot early, grab some grub, an' ride oot soon as it's light. The wagons can foller on the road. Yu'll find us somewhar."

In utter silence, then, the two men mounted their horses, that had been kept haltered close by, and rode away into the sulphurous, melancholy night.

The wind swept in from the range with a moan, blowing a stream of red sparks aloft. Thunder boomed. And a flare of lightning showed inky-black clouds swooping down from the west.

"We better think aboot keepin' ourselves an' beds dry," advised Brite. "Deuce, see thet Ann an' her father will be protected. Moze, get oot our tarp. Come, Reddie, we'll bunk under the chuck wagon an' say we like it."

By the time Moze, Brite, and Reddie had tied and stoned the ends of the tarpaulin so that it could not blow away the rain was coming in big scattered drops. Brite felt them cool and fresh upon his face. He and Reddie rushed for their shelter, and had made it fast when the pitch-blackness blazed into an intense blue-white brilliance which lighted camp, wagons, horses, and all the vicinity into a supernatural silvery clearness. A thunderbolt followed that seemed to rend the earth.

The succeeding blackness appeared an intensified medium impenetrable and pitchy. Then the thunder reverberated away in terrific concussions.

It took an hour or longer for the heavy center of the storm to pass, after which rain and wind, and an occasional flare, diminished in volume. Perceptibly the storm boomed and roared and flashed away. Whatever had been fated to happen out there was over. Brite had no doubt of its deadly outcome. Still, that might be over-confidence in his gunmen. He had nothing sure to go by. Ross Hite was a crafty desperado, and for all Brite knew he might be the equal of Texas Joe. But not of Panhandle Smith! Panhandle could only be compared to the great Texas killers of that decade.

Reddie had rolled in her blankets and

was asleep, as Brite dimly made out by the receding flares. He sought his own bed, weary, strangely calm, somehow fixed in his sense of victory.

It was still dark when noise aroused him from slumber. A grayness, however, betrayed the east and was the harbinger of day. He reached over to give Reddie a shake, but the dark object he had taken for her was her bed. Moze was up too, dishing out breakfast to the sleepy cowboys.

Hash Williams stamped up to the fire, spreading his huge hands.

"Williams, what's yore idee aboot startin'?" queried Ackerman sharply.

"Pronto. Yu drive Hardy same as yestiddy. Pete will drive our wagon. I'll go with the boys. Let's see, thet'd be six of us. Suppose yu keep one rider back with yu."

"All right. Rolly, yu're stuck heah with us."

In a moment more the five were mounted on restive mustangs, a formidable quintet in the pale morning light.

The rest were on the trail at daylight, when the range had just awakened, and all the distant landmarks were shrouded in mist. But the sky was clear, the east reddening, the air fresh and cool.

Rolly Little took the lead to scout the way, the wagons followed close together, and the *remuda* brought up the rear, with Brite and Reddie driving them. All horses were fresh. They trotted over the hard ground and splashed through the little pools. Meanwhile the red in the east deepened to rose, and then the rose burst into glorious sunrise, before which the shadows and mists, the mysteries of distance, and obscurity of draw and swale dissolved and vanished.

Five miles out Rolly Little rode off the trail and appeared to search. When the *remuda* came even with this point Brite swerved off to have a look. He found where Ross Hite had camped. Packs and saddles, utensils left beside a sodden bed of ashes, attested to the hasty departure of the stampeders. A long yell pierced Brite's ear, startling him. Little, some distance ahead, was waving. But his action seemed the result of excitement rather than alarm. Brite, curious and thrilled, galloped to join him; before he got there, however, Little pointed to an object on the ground and rode on.

Brite soon gazed down upon a dead man, flat on his back, arms spread, gun on the ground, a telling spectacle, emphatic of the law of that range. Brite rode an imaginary circle then, soon to come upon another of Hite's outfit, still and horrible, half his face shot away and his open shirt bloody. Farther on in the lengthy curve Brite espied a dead horse and two dead men, lying in a group. Brite did not go close, and he sheered off that circle and made for the *remuda*.

Reddie gave him a flashing, fearful glance.

"Girl, would yu believe it? Four of Hite's ootfit lyin' along the trail, in a circle. I only rode the half."

Reddie swallowed hard and had no answer. They rode on, eyes now glued ahead to the wavering, deceiving prairie. Buffalo showed in spots, dark patches on the green, off the trail. The purple hills beckoned, and beyond them the Wichita Mountains loomed dimly in the clear air. To the right the range sloped away to merge into sky. And what seemed hours of watchful suspense passed while the wheels rolled, the horses trotted, the drivers urged the lagging *remuda* on.

"Look ahaid!" called Reddie shrilly.

Smiling Pete stood on top of his wagon, waving his hat. His energetic actions could be assigned to either joy or alarm.

"Reddie! Pete sees our boys with the herd—or else a bunch of Comanches. Which?"

"I cain't say, Dad, but I'm prayin' hard," she cried.

Chapter Thirteen

The Herd Regained

FROM the summit of an endless slope Brite and Reddie espied far ahead that which elicited shouts of joy. Miles down in the green valley an immense wedge-shaped patch of color crawled over the prairie. It was the great herd together once more, sharp end pointed north, and the wide rear spread far to the east and west.

"*Thet cowboy!*" cried Reddie in awesome wonder.

Brite's end of the cavalcade caught up late that afternoon. The cattle had bunched in a meadow that surely would hold them all night, but at this hour they were weary and only a few were grazing.

Reddie swung the *remuda* off to a bend in the creek. Brite rode on up to the head of the swale, where Moze had halted. Only two drivers remained with the herd, each solitary on opposite sides of it. They drooped in their saddles. A scattering of low trees afforded a fairly good site for camp. All the other drivers were dismounted. Brite got off, and stumbled around on cramped legs until he located Panhandle and Texas Joe off to one side under a tree.

"Boss, did yu take a look oot there?" Texas called.

He pointed with long arm and his gesture had impressiveness.

"Boy, I been lookin' my eyes oot," responded Brite. "Shore don't know how to thank you an' Pan. Or what to say. I'll wait till yu tell me aboot it."

"There, Pan, what yu make of thet? He's an old Texas cattleman, too."

"Mr. Brite, if yu had looked the herd over carefully yu'd have seen thet we have fifteen hundred haid of longhorns more'n when we started."

"What!" ejaculated Brite, astounded.

"It's a fact, Boss," added Texas. "Our good luck is matchin' our bad. Thet Hite ootfit had a herd of their own, stole, I reckon, from other drivers. Must have had them just this side of the Little Wichita."

"Wal, I'm stumped. What's the brand?"

"We saw a lot of X Two Bar an' some Circle H. Do yu know them brands?"

"Reckon I don't."

"New-branded over an old mark, we figger. Wilder'n hell, too. As if we hadn't had enough hard work! Get Pan to tell yu aboot last night."

Texas strode off and Brite waited for the somber-faced gunman to speak, but was disappointed. Whereupon Brite, pretending tasks to do, moved about the campfire, where the trail drivers were congregated, talking low. The advent of Reddie and Ann entirely silenced them. If Brite had expected his boys to be elated, he made a mistake. Perhaps they were keeping something from him and the girls. Mr. Hardy was holding his own, considering the serious nature of his wound, but he had developed a fever and was

a pretty sick man. Williams said if they could get him to Doan's Post on the Red River that he had a fighting chance for his life. Presently Moze called them to supper, which turned out to be a more than usually silent meal.

San Sabe and Little rode in, after being relieved, and reported Indians with the buffalo several miles to the west.

"Thet bunch been keepin' along with us all day," said Williams. "But it ain't a very big one, so I reckon we needn't set up huggin' ourselves all night. Howsomever, we won't keep no fire burnin'."

"I gotta get some sleep," complained Texas Joe. "Panhandle is an owl. But if I don't get sleep I'm a daid one."

Just before dark Texas called Brite aside, out of earshot of camp.

"Gimme a smoke, Boss. Funny, me bein' nervous. Did Pan tell yu what come off last night?"

"Not a word."

"Humph! Damn these gunmen, anyhow," growled Texas. "Yu just cain't make one of 'em talk. I'll say Pan talked last night, though, with his gun. Boss, thet was the strangest deal I was ever up against. If we'd known there was ten or eleven men instead of six we might have been a little leary."

"Tell me as much as yu like, Texas," replied Brite quietly. "It's enough for me to know yu're safe an' we got our cattle back."

"Ahuh. Wal, Hite wasn't standin' guard, so we reckoned after it was over. Luck was with us. We rode oot an' located before the storm busted. So when the lightnin' began to flash we didn't have far to go. As we worked up on the herd we seen one guard ride off hell-bent for election. He'd seen us shore. Jest after thet the rain hit us somethin' fierce. We split as planned an' started round the herd. They was millin' around in a bunch, lowin' an' crackin' their horns, an' gettin' restless. Wind an' rain, an' lightnin' too, were all at my back. An' thet shore was lucky. I hadn't gone far when I heahed a shot. The wind was comin' off an' on, so when it lulled a bit I could heah. Thet was how I come to heah one of Hite's guards yell: 'Thet yu, Bill?—Yu heah a shot?'

"I yelled yes an' kept on ridin'. It was black as coal 'cept when the flashes came. I got close to this guard when all the sky 'peared to blaze. He yelled: '*Hell! Who—!*' An' thet was all he had time for. I rode on, sort of feelin' my way, bumpin' into cattle off an' on. If they'd stampeded then they'd run me down. It didn't rain. It jest came down in bucketfuls. I couldn't see more'n twenty steps, an' could heah nothin' but wind an' rain an' thunder.

"Then I seen another guard. Seen him clear. But the next flash was short an' when I shot it was in the dark. When it lighten'd again I seen a hawss down an' the guard gettin' to his feet. It went dark again quick jest as I shot. An' he shot back, for I saw the flash an' heahed his gun. He missed, though. An' so did I. Couldn't see him next time, so I rode on ahaid.

"Wal, after thet I had it most as light as day, for seconds at a time. But I didn't meet no more guards. A long time after I expected to I seen the white flag wavin' from Pan's hat, an' I was shore glad. We met an' yelled at each other, then the longhorns took it in their haids to run. Right at us! We had to ride to get oot of the way. But the lightnin' kept flashin', an' the rain slowin' up, so we kept tab on them

easy. They must have run ten miles. The storm passed an' they quit to settle down."

"How aboot Hite?" queried Brite.

"We hung around the herd, watchin' an' listenin'. But nobody come. In the mawnin', however, four hawssmen charged us. They had only one rifle. An' we had our buffalo guns. So we stopped them an' held them off. So far as we could tell we didn't hit one of them. Finally they rode off over the ridge. Pan an' me both recognized Ross Hite. He had the rifle, an' he bloodied me up. Hope I run into him again."

"I hope yu don't," returned Brite bluntly.

"Wal, so does Panhandle," drawled Texas. "Do yu know, Boss, I reckon Pan an' Hite have crossed trails before. Because Pan said I didn't want to be meetin' Hite before he did. An' after thet I needn't never look for him again."

Brite slept with one eye open that night. It passed at length without any disruption of the quiet camp. The trail drivers got off slowly and not until the sun burst red over the ridgetop.

Orders were for the wagons and *remuda* to keep close to the herd. Watchful eyes circled the horizon that day. Far over on each side of the trail black lines of buffalo showed against the gray. Their movement was imperceptible. Brite often turned his glass upon them, but more often on the distant knolls and high points, seeking for Indian signs.

Eight or ten miles a day was all the trail drivers risked for their herds. Even this could not always be adhered to, especially with the obstacles of flooded rivers ahead, buffalo all around, and the menace of the savages, if not sight of them, ever present. Brite had begun to feel the strain of suspense, but had not noted it in any of his men.

At length, about mid-afternoon, it was almost a relief actually to sight a band of mounted Indians on a high top back from the trail. Uncertainty ceased for Brite, at least. By trying, he ascertained that he could not make out this band with his naked eye. Perhaps the blurred figures might be clearer to his keen-sighted scouts. With the glass, however, Brite could see well enough to recognize the Indians as Comanches, and in sufficient force to cause more than apprehension.

Whereupon he rode forward to acquaint Hash Williams with his discovery. The hunter halted his team, and taking up the glasses without a word, he searched the horizon line.

"Ahuh, I see 'em. About forty or so," he said, and cursed under his breath. "Looks like Comanches to me. If thet's Nigger Hawss we're shore flirtin' with the undertaker. Ride on ahaid an' tell Shipman to keep on goin' till he finds a place where we'd have some chance if attacked."

Brite was to learn that Texas had already espied the Indians.

"Up to deviltry, I reckon," he said. "I was thinkin' thet very thing Williams advises. Don't tell the girls, Boss."

At last, at almost dusk, the herd was halted out on a flat near which a thread of water ran down a shallow gully. Camp was selected on the north bank in the shelter of rocks. Moze was ordered to make his fire in a niche where it would be unseen. The riders came and went, silent, watchful, somber. Night fell. The wolves mourned. The warm summer air seemed to settle down over the camp as if it bore no tidings of ill. But the shadows in the

rock cracks and caverns harbored menace.

Three guards kept continual watch around camp all night and six guards stayed with the herd. Two of the drivers were allowed to sleep at one time. So the night passed and the gray dawn—always the perilous hour for Indian attack—and the morning broke without incident.

But that day was beset with trials—barren ground for the cattle, hard going on the horses, ceaseless dread on the part of the trail drivers for the two girls and the injured man in their party. Several times during the day the Comanches were sighted watching them, riding along even with their position, keeping to the slow pace of the herd. How sinister that seemed to Brite! The red devils knew the trail; they were waiting for a certain place, or for something to happen; then they would attack.

Loss of sleep and ceaseless vigilance by night, and the slow march by day, wore upon the drivers. Brite had ceased to count the camps. Every hour was fraught with dread expectation. Yet at last they reached the Red River. The buffalo were crossing some miles above the trail, but a spur of the prodigious herd kept swinging in behind. Texas Joe pointed the cattle across and took the lead himself, magnificent in his dauntlessness.

Night found them in camp, some of them spent, all of them wearied, yet cheered by the fact that Doan's Post was within striking distance on the morrow.

Doan's Post gave evidence of having more than its usual number of inhabitants and visitors. Horses were numerous on the grass plain around the post. Half a dozen wagons were drawn up before the gray, squat, weather-beaten houses. A sign, *Doan's Store*, in large black letters, showed on the south side of the largest house. This place, run by Tom Doan, was a trading-post for Indians and cattlemen, and was in the heyday of its useful and hazardous existence.

Mounted men, riders with unsaddled horses, Indians lounging and squatting before the doors, watched the newcomers with interest. Arriving travelers were the life of Doan's Post. But the way Panhandle and Texas Joe dismounted a goodly distance from these bearded watchers, and proceeded forward on foot, surely had as much significance for them as it had for Brite. The crowd of a dozen or more spread to let the two slow visitors approach the door. Then Brite came on beside the Hardy wagon. Reddie, disobedient as usual, had joined them.

"Howdy, Tom," called Brite to the stalwart man in the door.

"Howdy yoreself," came the hearty response. "Wal, damme if it ain't Adam Brite. Git down an' come in."

"Tom, yu ought to remember my foreman, Texas Joe. An' this is Panhandle Smith. We've got a sick man in the wagon heah. Hardy, by name. Thet's his daughter on the seat. They're all thet's left of a wagon train bound for California. Can yu take care of them for a while, till Hardy is able to join another train?"

"Yu bet I can," replied the genial Doan. Willing hands lifted Hardy out of the wagon and carried him into the post. Ann sat on the wagon seat, her pretty face worn and thin, her eyes full of tears, perhaps of deliverance, perhaps of something else, as she gazed down upon the bareheaded cowboy.

"We've come to the partin' of the trail, Miss Ann," Deuce was saying in strong and vibrant voice. "Yu're safe heah, thank God. An' yore dad will come around. I'm shore hopin' we'll make it through to Dodge. An'—I'm askin' yu—will it be all right for me to wait there till yu come?"

"Oh yes—I—I'd be so glad," she murmured shyly.

"An' go on to California with yu?" he concluded boldly.

"If yu will," she replied, and for a moment time and place were naught to these two.

"Aw, thet's good of yu," he burst out at last. "It's jest been wonderful—knowin' yu. Good-by. I must go back to the boys."

"Good-by," she faltered, and gave him her hand. Deuce kissed it right gallantly, and then fled out across the prairie toward the herd.

Chapter Fourteen

Pond Creek

EDDIE jumped off her horse beside the Hardy wagon, on the seat of which Ann sat still as a stone, watching the cowboy. Ackerman turned once to hold his sombrero high. Then she waved her handkerchief. He wheeled and did not look back again.

"Ann, it's pretty tough—this sayin' good-by," spoke up Reddie. "Let's go in the post, away from these men. I'm shore gonna bawl."

"Oh, Reddie, I—I'm bawling now," cried Ann as she clambered down, not sure of her sight. "He was so—so good—so fine. Oh, will we ever meet—again? Reddie, I'll miss him so!"

Arm in arm, the girls went toward the door of the post, where Brite observed Ann shrink visibly from two sloe-eyed, gaunt, and somber Indians.

"Let's get this over pronto, Tex," said Brite. "I'll buy what supplies Doan can furnish."

"All right, Boss. Pan an' I will come in presently," replied Texas. "We want to ask some questions thet mebbe Doan wouldn't answer."

Brite hurried into the post. It was a picturesque, crowded, odorous place with its colorful Indian trappings, its formidable arsenal, its full shelves and burdened counters. When Doan returned from the after quarters, where evidently he had seen to Hardy's comfort, Brite wrote with a stub of a lead pencil the supplies he needed.

"What you think? This ain't Santone or Abilene," he said gruffly. "But I can let you have flour, beans, coffee, tobacco, an' mebbe—"

"Do yore best, Tom," interrupted Brite hastily. "I'm no robber. Can yu haul the stuff oot to camp?"

"Shore, inside an hour."

"Thet's all, then, an' much obliged. Any trail drivers ahaid of me?"

"Not lately. You've got the trail all to yourself. An' thet's damn bad."

Brite was perfectly well aware of this.

"Comanches an' Kiowas particular bad lately," went on Doan. "Both Nigger Horse an' Santana are on the rampage. Let me give you a hunch. If thet old Comanche devil rides into camp, you parley with him, argue with him, but in the end you give him what he wants. An' for thet reason take grub to spare an' particular coffee an' tobacco. But if thet Kiowa chief stops you don't give him a thing 'cept a piece of

your mind. Santana is dangerous to weak outfits. But he's a coward an' he can be bluffed. Don't stand any monkey business from the Kiowas. Show them you are heavily armed an' will shoot at the drop of a hat."

"Much obliged, Doan. I'll remember your advice."

"You're goin' to be blocked by buffalo, unless you can break through. I'll bet ten million buffalo have passed heah this month."

"What month an' day is it, anyhow?"

"Wal, you have been trail drivin'! Let's see—it's the sixteenth of July."

"Yu don't say? Time shore flies on the trail. I'd like to know if Ross Hite an' three of his ootfit have passed this way lately?"

"Been several little outfits by this week," replied the trader evasively. "Travelin' light an' fast. I don't know Hite personally. Heerd of him, shore. I don't ask questions of my customers, Brite."

"Yu know yore business, Doan," returned Brite shortly. "For yore benefit, though, I'll tell yu Hite's ootfit raided us twice. He had all of my herd at one time."

"Hell you say!" ejaculated Doan sharply, pulling his beard. "What come of it?"

"Wal, we got the stock back an' left some of Hite's ootfit along the trail."

Reddie Bayne came stumbling along, wiping her eyes.

"Wait, Reddie. I'll go with yu," called Brite. "Where can I say good-by to the Hardys?"

She pointed to the open door through which she had emerged. Brite went in quickly and got that painful interview over.

"Just a minute, Brite," called Doan as the cattleman hurried out. "I'm not so particular aboot Indians as I am aboot men of my own color. But I have to preserve friendly relations with all the tribes. They trade with me. I am goin' to tell you, though, that the two bucks standin' ootside are scouts for some Comanche ootfit, an' they've been waitin' for the first trail herd to come along. Pack the bucks back to the next herd, if you can, though it's a mistaken policy. But the hunch I want to give you is to stop those two Comanches."

"Stop them?"

"Shore. Don't let them come oot an' look over your ootfit—then ride to report to their chief. Like as not it's Nigger Horse, himself."

"Thet *is* a hunch. I'll tell Texas," replied Brite, pondering, and went out with Reddie.

"Gee!" she whispered, with round eyes. "He's givin' us a hunch to shoot some more Comanches."

"'Pears thet way. Yet he shore didn't give us any hunch aboot Ross Hite."

Texas Joe and Panhandle appeared to be in a colloquy with two men, and Williams and Smiling Pete were engaged with the remainder of the white men present.

"Williams, yu'll ride over to say good-by?" queried Brite.

"Shore we will. For two bits I'd go on all the way with yu," he replied.

"Wal, I'll give yu a lot more than thet. Yu've been mighty helpful. I couldn't begin to thank yu."

"Pete wants to hunt buffalo," rejoined Williams. "An' thet sticks us heah."

Brite got on his horse. "Tex, we're goin', Come heah."

Texas strode over, and giving Reddie a gentle shove as she mounted, he came close to Brite.

"Texas," whispered Brite, bending

over. "Those two Comanches there are scouts for a raidin' bunch, so says Doan. Damn if he didn't hint we ought to do somethin' aboot it. He cain't, 'cause he has to keep on friendly terms with all the reddies."

"Wal, Boss, we got thet hunch, too, an' heahed somethin' aboot Hite. I'll tell yu when we come back to camp."

Reddie had put her black to a canter, and had covered half the distance back to camp before Brite caught up with her.

"Save yore hawss, girl. What's yore hurry?"

"Dad, I just get sick inside when I see thet look come to Texas Jack's eyes," she replied.

"What look?"

"I don't know what to call it. I saw it first thet day just before he drawed on Wallen. Like thet queer lightnin' flash we saw durin' the storm the other night."

"Reddie, yu ought to be used to hard looks of trail drivers by now. It's a hard life."

"But I want Texas Jack to quit throwin' guns!" she cried with surprisingly poignant passion.

"Wal! Wal!" exclaimed Brite. "An' why, lass?"

"Pretty soon he'll be another gunman like Panhandle. An' then, sooner or later, he'll get killed!"

"I reckon thet's true enough," replied Brite. "Come to think aboot thet, I feel the same way. What air we goin' to do to stop him?"

"Stop Tex? It cain't be done, Dad."

"Wal, mebbe not oot heah on the trail. But if we ever end this drive—then it could be done. *Yu* could stop Tex, lass."

She spurred the black and drew away, swift as the wind. Brite gathered that she had realized how she could put an end to the wildness of Joe Shipman.

The cattle were grazing and in good order. Westward along the river clouds of dust rolled aloft, and at intervals a low roar of hoofs came on the still hot air. The buffalo were crossing the Red River. Brite and Reddie took the places of San Sabe and Rolly Little at guard, and the two cowboys were like youngsters just released from school. They raced for town. Several slow, dragging hours passed by. The herd did not move half a mile; the *remuda* covered less ground. Brite did not relish sight of a mounted Indian who rode out from the post and from a distance watched the camp.

A little later Brite was startled out of his rest by gunshots. He leaped up in time to see the Indian spy riding like a streak across the plain. Texas and Panhandle, two hundred yards to the left, were shooting at the Comanche as fast as they could pull triggers. Probably their idea was to frighten him, thought Brite, in which case they succeeded amply. No Indian could ride so well as a Comanche and this one broke all records for a short race. It chanced that he took down the plain in a direction which evidently brought him close to the far end of the herd, where one of the cowboys was on guard. This fellow, either Holden or Bender, saw the Indian and opened up on him with a buffalo gun. From that instant until the Comanche was out of sight he rode hidden on the far side of his mustang.

Texas Joe was using forceful range language when he rode in, and manifestly had been irritated by something.

"What ails yu, Tex?" asked Brite. I'm feelin' cheerful, myself."

"Yu're loco. Do yu know what we did? We hired them cowhands to hawg-tie the two Comanches an' to keep 'em in Doan's storehouse for a couple of days. Great idee! But all for nothin'. This buck we was shootin' at had counted our wagons, hawsses, cattle, an' drivers. We was shore shootin' at thet redskin to kill. But he was oot of range. What'n hell was eatin' yu men thet yu didn't see him long ago?"

Brite maintained a discreet silence.

"Boss, the supplies will be oot pronto," went on Texas as he dismounted. "Reddie, if yu have another hawss handy I'll relieve one of the boys."

"Same heah," spoke up Panhandle.

"Throw some grub pronto, Moze. Boss, our man Hite rode through heah day before yestiddy mawnin'. He had three fellers with him, one crippled up serious an' had to be tied in the saddle. Hite was spittin' fire, an' they all was ugly."

"Did they stop at Doan's?"

"Shore, accordin' to Bud. They was oot of grub an' ammunition. Had only two pack hawsses. We shore won't see no more of Hite till we get to Dodge. He hangs oot at Hays City, so Bud said, an' comes often to Dodge."

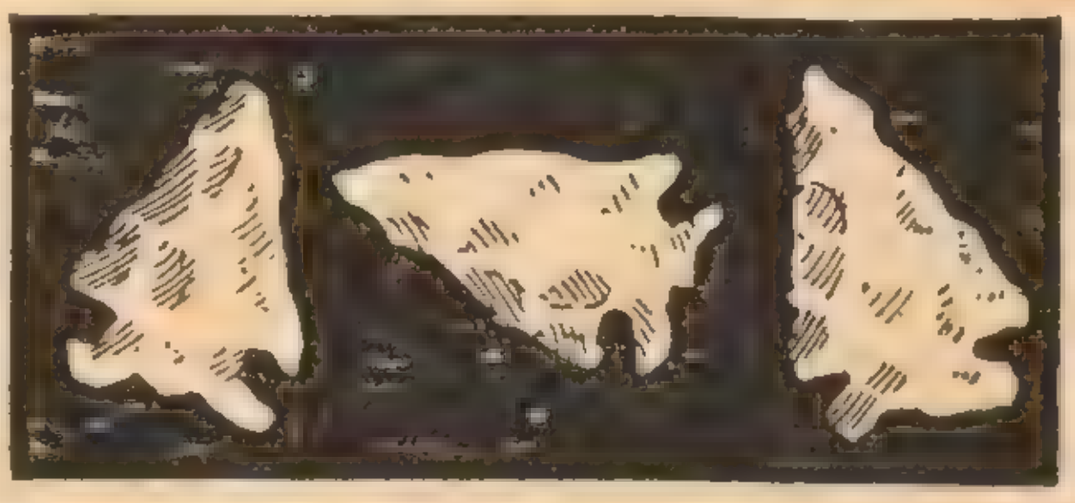
"Let Hite go, boys. No sense huntin' up trouble," advised Brite tersely.

"Boss, yu're a forgivin' cuss," drawled Texas admiringly. "Now I just cain't be thet way. An' Pan, heah, why, he'll ride a thousand miles to meet thet Ross Hite again. An' I'm goin' with him."

"Yu air not," spoke up Reddie tartly, a red spot in each cheek.

"Wal, doggone! There's the kid, bossy as ever. Brite, if I get plugged on the way up yu let Reddie boss the ootfit."

Texas Joe had found a way to make Reddie wince, and he was working it on every possible occasion. The chances were surely even that the daring cowboy would lose his life one way or another before the end of the trail, and Reddie simply could not stand a hint of it without betraying her fear.



Brite's outfit left Doan's Post before sunrise next morning with just short of six thousand longhorn cattle. The buffalo herd had apparently kept along the Red River.

In the afternoon of that day a band of Comanches rode out from a pass between two hills and held up the cavalcade. Brite galloped ahead in some trepidation, yelling for Reddie to leave the *remuda* and follow him. When he arrived at the head of the herd he found Texas Joe and Panhandle, with the other drivers, lined up before about thirty squat, pointed-faced, long-haired Indians.

"Boss, meet Nigger Hawss an' his ootfit," was Texas's laconic greeting.

"Howdy, Chief," returned Brite, facing Nigger Horse. This Comanche did not look his fame, but appeared to be an ordinary redskin, stolid and unofficious. He did not altogether lack dignity. To Brite he was a surprise and a relief. But his basilisk eyes might have hid much. Brite wished the buffalo hunters had come on with them.

"How," replied Nigger Horse, raising a slow hand.

"What yu want, Chief?"

"Beef."

Brite waved a magnanimous hand

toward the herd. "Help yoreself."

The Comanche spoke in low grunts to his red men. "Tobac," he went on, his dark, inscrutable eyes again fixing on Brite.

"Plenty. Wagon come," replied Brite, pointing to Moze, who had the team approaching at a trot. Nigger Horse gazed in the direction of the chuck wagon, then back at the vast herd, and lastly at the formidably armed drivers solidly arrayed in a line.

"Flour," resumed the chief. His English required a practiced ear to distinguish, but Brite understood him and nodded his willingness.

"Coffee."

Brite held up five fingers to designate the number of sacks he was willing to donate.

"Beans."

"Heap big bag," replied Brite.

Manifestly this generosity from a trail driver had not been the accustomed thing.

"Boss, the old devil wants us to refuse somethin'," put in Texas.

"An' he'll keep on askin' till yu have to refuse," added Panhandle.

Moze arrived with the chuck wagon, behind which the Comanches rode in a half circle, greedy-eyed and jabbering. Moze's black face could not turn pale, but it looked mighty strange.

"Pile oot, Moze," ordered Brite. "Open up yore box, an' get oot the goods we selected for this missionary business."

"Yas s-suh—y-yas, suh," replied the Negro, scared out of his wits.

"Sack of flour first, Moze," said Brite. "An' throw it up on his hawss. Make oot it's heavy."

Obviously this last was not necessary. Either the sack was heavy or Moze had grown weak, for he labored with it and almost knocked Nigger Horse off his mustang. The Indian let out what sounded like "Yah! Yah!" But he surely held on to the flour. Then Brite ordered Moze to burden the Comanche further with the generous donation of tobacco, coffee, and beans.

"There yu air, Chief," called out Brite, making a show of friendliness.

"Flour," said Nigger Horse.

"Yu got it," replied Brite, pointing to the large sack.

The Indian emphatically shook his head.

"Greasy old robber!" ejaculated Texas. "He wants more. Boss, heah's where yu stand fast. If yu give in he'll take all our grub."

"Brite, don't give him any more. We'd better fight than starve," said Panhandle.

Whereupon Brite, just as emphatically, shook his head and said, "No more, Chief."

The Comanche yelled something in his own tongue. Its content was not reassuring.

"Heap powder—bullet," added Nigger Horse.

"No," declared Brite.

The Indian thundered his demand. This had the effect of rousing Brite's ire, not a particularly difficult task. Brite shook his head in slow and positive refusal.

"Give Injun all!" yelled the chief.

"*Give Injun hell!*" roared Brite, suddenly furious.

"Thet's the talk, Boss," shouted Texas. "Yu can bluff the old geezer."

"Brite, stick to thet," broke in Panhandle in a ringing voice. "Listen, all of yu! If it comes to a fight, Tex an' I air good for Nigger Hawss an' four or five on each side of him. Yu boys

look after the ends."

"Reddie, yu duck back behind the wagon an' do yore shootin' from there," ordered Texas.

Then ensued the deadlock. It was a critical moment, with life or death quivering on a hair balance. How hideously that savage's lineaments changed! The wily old Comanche had made his bluff and it had been called. Probably he understood more of the white man's language than he pretended. Certainly he comprehended the cold front of those frowning trail drivers.

"Boys, yu got time to get on the ground," called the practical Texas, slipping out of his saddle and stepping out in front of his horse. In another moment all the men, except Brite, had followed suit. Texas and Panhandle held a gun in each hand. At such close range they would do deadly work before the Comanches could level a rifle or draw a bow. Nigger Horse undoubtedly saw this—that he had bluffed the wrong outfit. Still, he did not waver in his savage dominance.

Brite had an inspiration. "Chief," he burst out, "we do good by yu. We give heaps. But no more. If yu want fight, we fight. Two trail herds tomorrow." Here Brite held up two fingers, and indicating his cattle made signs that more were coming up the trail. "Heap more. So many like buffalo. White men with herds come all time. Two moons." And with both hands up he opened each to spread his fingers, and repeated this time and again.

"Ugh!" ejaculated Nigger Horse. He understood, and that tactful persuasion of Brite's was the deciding factor. He let out sharp guttural sentences. Two of his followers wheeled their ponies toward the herd, fitting arrows to their bows. Then Nigger Horse, burdened with his possessions, not one parcel of which would he relinquish to eager hands, rode back without another word, followed by his band.

"Close shave!" breathed Brite in intense relief. "Let's get on, boys," he ordered. "Once across the Canadian we'll be halfway an' more to Dodge."

"We'll drive 'em, Boss," replied Texas Joe grimly. "No more lazy, loafin', fattenin' mossy-horns this trip!"

They made ten miles more before night, ending the longest drive since they had left San Antonio. The night fell dark, with rumble of thunder and sheet lightning in the distance. The tired cattle bedded down early and held well all night. Morning came lowering and threatening, with a chill wind that swept over the herd from the north. Soon the light failed until day was almost as dark as night.

A terrific hailstorm burst upon the luckless herd and drivers. The hailstones grew larger as the storm swept on, until the pellets of gray ice were as large as walnuts. The drivers were forced to protect heads and faces with whatever was available. Reddie Bayne was knocked off her horse and carried senseless to the wagon; San Sabe swayed in his saddle like a drunken man; Texas Joe tied his coat round his sombrero and yelled when the big hailstones bounced off his head; bloody and bruised, the other drivers resembled men who had engaged in fierce fistic encounters.

When this queer freak of nature passed, the ground was covered half a foot deep with hailstones. Dead rabbits and antelope littered the plain, and all the way, as far as Brite could see to the rear, stunned and beaten cattle lay on the ground or staggered along.

"I told yu-all things were gonna hap-

pen," yelled Texas to his followers as they made camp that night, sore and beaten of body. "But I'm not carin', if only the buffalo will pass us by."

Next day they were visited by members of a tribe of Kiowas supposed to be friendly with the whites. They had held "heap big peace talk" with Uncle Sam. Brite did not give so much as he had in the case of the Comanches, yet he did well by them.

During the night these savages stampeded the south end of the herd. How it was done did not appear until next day, when among the scattered cattle was found a longhorn here and there with an arrow imbedded in his hide. Some of these had to be shot. The herd was held over until all the stampeded steers and cows could be rounded up. It took three days of strenuous riding by day and guarding by night. Texas Joe and his trail drivers passed into what San Sabe described as being "poison-fightin' mad!"

Bitter as gall to them was it to see two trail herds pass them by and forge to the front. After seven weeks or more of leadership! But Brite did not take it so hard. Other herds now, and both together not so large as his, would bear the brunt of what lay ahead.

That fourth day, when they were off again, buffalo once more made their appearance. Soldiers from Fort Cobb, a post forty miles off the trail to the east, informed Brite that they had been turned back by the enormous, impenetrable mass of buffalo some miles westward. They had been trailing a marauding bunch of Apaches from the Staked Plain.

Brite's men drove on, and their difficulties multiplied. Stampedes became frequent; storms and swollen creeks further impeded their progress; the chuck wagon, springing leaks in its boatlike bottom, had almost to be carried across the North Fork of the Red. Sometimes it became necessary to build pontoons and riders had to swim their horses alongside, holding the pontoons in place. But they kept on doggedly, their foreman cool and resourceful, all bound to this seemingly impossible drive.

Pond Creek, which headed sixty miles northwest of Fort Cobb, was an objective Texas Joe spoke of for twenty-four hours and drove hard one long day to reach.

Brite had his misgivings when at sunset of that day he rode to the top of a slope and saw the herd gaining momentum on the down grade, drawn by sight and scent of water after a hot, dry drive.

This creek, usually only a shallow run, appeared bank-full, a swift, narrow river extremely dangerous at that stage for beast and man. There had been no rain that day anywhere near the region the herd had traversed. Texas Joe had been justified in thinking Pond Creek was at normal height, and he had let the herd go over the ridge without first scouting ahead, as was his custom. It was too late now unless the herd could be stopped.

Brite spurred his horse down the slope, yelling over his shoulder for Reddie to hurry. Drivers on each side of the herd were forging to the front, inspired, no doubt, by the fiercely riding Texas Joe. It was bad going, as Brite found out to his sorrow when he was thrown over the head of his falling horse, thus sustaining a mean fall. Reddie was quick to leap off and go to his side.

"Oh, Dad! Thet was a tumble!" she

cried. "I thought yu'd break yore neck— Set up. Air yu all heah? Let me feel."

"I reckon—nothin' busted," groaned the cattleman, getting up laboriously. "If thet ground hadn't been soft—wal, yu'd—"

"My Gawd, Dad! Look!" cried Reddie frantically, leaping on her horse. "They're stampedin' down this hill."

Brite got up to stand a moment surveying the scene. A tremendous trampling, tussling, cracking roar, permeated by a shrill bawling sound, dinned in his ears.

"Red, it's only the back end thet's stampedin'," he shouted.

"Yes. But they're rushin' the front down."

"Rustle. We can help some, but don't take chances."

They galloped down along the flank of the jostling cattle to the short quarter of a mile of slope between the point of the herd and the river. The drivers were here in a bunch, yelling, riding, shooting, plunging their mounts at the foremost old mossy-horns. Brite and Reddie rode in to help, keeping close to the outside.

Then followed a hot-pressed, swift, and desperate charge on the part of the trail drivers to hold the front of the herd. It was hazardous work. Texas Joe yelled orders through pale lips, but no driver at any distance heard them. The bulls and steers had been halted, but as pressure was exerted in the rear they began to toss their great, horned heads, and to bawl and tear up the ground. The mass of the herd, up on the steeper slope, maddened now to get to the water, could not be bolstered back by the front line.

"*Back!*" yelled Texas, in stentorian voice, waving wide his arms to the drivers. All save San Sabe heard or saw, and ran their horses to either side. Deuce, Texas, Reddie, Whittaker, and Bender reached the open behind Brite just as a terrible groan ran through the herd.

Texas Joe's frantic yells and actions actuated all to join in the effort to make San Sabe hear. His position was extremely perilous, being exactly in the center of the straining herd. His horse was rearing. San Sabe, gun in each hand, shot fire and smoke into the very faces of the leaders. Panhandle, Holden, and Little, flashing by on terrorized horses, failed to attract him. How passionate and fierce his actions! Hatless and coatless, his hair flying, this half-breed *vaquero* fronted the maddened herd with an instinct of centuries of cattle mastery.

The line of horned heads curved at each end, as if a dam had burst where it joined the banks. Suddenly then the center gave way with that peculiar grinding roar of hoofs, horns, and bodies. Like a flood it spilled down upon San Sabe. His horse gave a magnificent leap back and to the side, just escaping the rolling juggernaut. The horse saw, if San Sabe did not, that escape to either side was impossible. On the very horns of the running bulls he plunged for the river.

But he did not gain a yard on those fleet longhorns, propelled forward by thousands of rushing bodies behind. To Brite's horror it appeared that the limber cattle actually gained on San Sabe. His horse tripped at the brink of the bank and plunged down. The rider was pitched headlong. Next instant a live wall of beasts poured over the brink with resounding hollow splash, and as if by magic the river bank became obliterated.

Chapter Fifteen

Lightning and Buffalo

SPELLBOUND, Brite gazed at the thrilling and frightful spectacle. A gigantic wave rose and swelled across the creek to crash over the opposite bank. In another moment the narrow strip of muddy water vanished, and in its place was a river of bristling horns, packed solid, twisting, bobbing under and up again, and sweeping down with the current. But for that current of deep water the stream bed would have been filled with cattle from bank to bank, and the mass of the herd would have plunged across over hundreds of dead bodies.

In an incredibly short space the whole herd had rolled into the river, line after line taking the place of the beasts that were swept away in the current. From plunging pell-mell the cattle changed abruptly to swimming pell-mell. And when the last line had gone overboard the front line, far down the stream, was wading out on the other side.

The change from sodden, wrestling crash to strange silence seemed as miraculous as the escape of the herd. Momentum and current forced the crazy animals across the river. Two hundred yards down all the opposite shelving shore was blotted out by cattle, and as hundreds waded out other hundreds took their places, so that there was no blocking of the on-sweeping tide of heads and horns. It was the most remarkable sight Brite had ever seen in connection with cattle.

Texas Joe was the first to break out of his trance.

"Damn thet fool!" he thundered with a mighty curse and with convulsed face, eyes shut tight, and tears streaming from under the lids, with lips drawn and cheeks set; he seemed to gaze up blindly at the sky, invoking help where there was no help, surrendering in that tragic moment to the inevitable and ruthless calling of the trail driver.

Panhandle rode down to the scored bank where San Sabe had disappeared. His comrade Holden followed slowly. Rolly Little bestrode his horse as if stunned.

Brite remembered Reddie, and hastened to her side. With bowed head and shaking shoulders she bent over, hanging to the pommel of her saddle.

"Brace up, Reddie," said Brite, though deeply shaken himself. "We got to go through."

"Oh—we'd grown—like one family," cried the girl, raising her face.

"Reddie, drive yore *remuda* in," shouted Texas in a strident voice. "Deuce, take Holden an' foller the herd. Rest of yu help me with the wagon."

Night settled down again, silent except for the rush of the sliding river and the strange backlashes of sand-laden water. Moze bustled silently around the campfire. Several of the drivers were eating as if that task, like the others, had to be done. Texas, Panhandle, Deuce, and Rolly were out on guard, hungry and wet and miserable. Reddie had gone supperless to bed. Brite sat drying his legs, fighting his conscience. Three young faces appeared spectrally in the white embers of the fire.

Next day it was as if the trail drivers had never weakened and almost crack-

ed. Obstacles heightened their spirits and deadened their memories. Deer Creek was bone-dry. The stock got through the following day without water. A third drive over miles of wasteland and dragging sand put horses as well as cattle in a precarious condition. All night long the herd milled like the ceaseless eddy of a river, bawling and lowing. No sleep or rest that night for any of Brite's outfit! If next morning they found a branch of the South Canadian dusty and dry, that would be the end.

Indians stopped with Moze that night. "No water!" they said. Buffalo had ranged to the west.

At dawn the drivers pointed the herd and goaded them on ruthlessly. The sun rose red in a copper sky. The heat veils floated up from the sand. Miles from the branch of the Canadian the old mossy-horns scented water. The riders could not hold them. Nothing could stop the thirst-maddened brutes. When the leaders launched out, the whole herd stampeded as one. The trail drivers had a wild run, but without hope of checking the stampede. They rolled on, a sweeping, thundering clatter, shaking the earth and sending aloft a great yellow cloud of dust.

The river checked that stampede and saved Brite incalculable loss. Once across the South Branch into grassy level range again, the trail drivers forgot the past and looked only ahead. Day after day passed. At Wolf Creek they encountered the long-looked-for buffalo herd, the ragged strings of which reached out to the east. Texas Joe rested his outfit and stock a day at this good camp site.

A sultry night presaged storm. But the interminable hours wore to dawn, and the torrid day passed without rain. Texas Joe, sensing another storm, drove the herd into the head of a narrow valley, steep-walled and easy to guard.

"I don' like this heah weather," said Whittaker, breaking a somber silence around the campfire.

"Wal, who does?" rejoined Texas wearily. "But a good soakin' rain would help us oot."

"Shore, if it rained rain."

"My hair cracks too much to suit me," said another.

"Reddie, how's the *remuda?*"

"Actin' queer," she replied. "Sniffin' the air, poundin' the ground, quiverin' all over."

Brite feared that the peculiar condition of earth, atmosphere, and sky presaged one of the rare, awe-inspiring, and devastating electric storms that this region was noted for. He recalled what trail drivers had told which seemed too incredible to believe. But here was the strange red sunset, the absolutely still and sultry dusk, the overcast sky that yet did not wholly hide the pale stars, the ghastliness of the unreal earth.

"World comin' to an end!" ejaculated Texas Joe. Like all men of the open, used to the phenomena of the elements, he was superstitious and acknowledged a mysterious omniscience in nature.

"Fine night to be home sparkin' my girl," joked Rolly Little.

"Rolly, boy, yu'll never see home no more, nor thet flirtin' little redhaid," taunted Deuce Ackerman fatalistically.

"Come to think of thet, all redhaids are flirty an' fickle," philosophized Texas.

Reddie heard, but for once had no

audacious retort. She was obsessed with gravity.

"Tex—Dad—it ain't natural," she said nervously.

"Wal, lass, whatever it is, it'll come an' pass, an' spare us mebbe, please God," rejoined the cattleman.

"Boss, is it gonna be one of them storms when electricity runs like water?" queried Texas.

"I don't know, Tex, I swear to goodness I don't. But I've heahed when the sky looks like a great white globe of glass with a light burnin' inside thet it'll burst presently an' let down a million jumpin' stars an' balls an' ropes an' sparks."

Texas got to his feet, dark and stern. "Fork yore hawsses, everybody. If we're goin' to hell we'll go together."

They rode out to join the four guards already on duty.

"What's comin' off?" yelled Less Holden, as the others came within earshot.

"We're gamblin' with death, cowboy," returned Texas Joe.

So indeed it seemed to Brite. The weird conditions imperceptibly increased. It became so light that the faces of the drivers shone like marble in moonlight. There were no shadows. Darkness of night had been eliminated, yet no moon showed, and the stars had vanished in the globe overhead.

"We can hold 'em in heah onless they stampede," said Texas. "What's the stock doin', Less?"

"Not grazin', thet's shore. An' the *remuda* is plumb loco."

Brite followed Reddie over to the dark patch of mustangs, huddled in a compact drove under the west wall. This embankment was just steep and high enough to keep the mustangs from climbing. A restless nickering ran through the mass. They trooped with low roar of hoofs away from the approaching riders.

"Just a little fussy, Dad," said Reddie hopefully.

"Cain't yu sing them quiet, Reddie?" asked Brite.

"I'll try, but I shore don't feel like no nightingale tonight," replied Reddie. "I haven't heahed any of the boys."

In low and quavering tones Reddie began *La Paloma* and as she progressed with the song her sweet and plaintive voice grew stronger. The strange atmosphere appeared to intensify it, until toward the close she was singing with a power and beauty that entranced the listening cattlemen. When she finished, Texas Joe, who seldom sang, burst out with his wild and piercing tenor, and then the others chimed in to ring a wonderful medley down that lonely valley. The *remuda* quieted down, and at length the great herd appeared chained to music.

The trail drivers sang in chorus and in quartets, duets and singly, until they had repeated their limited stock of songs, and had exhausted their vocal powers.

When they had no more to give, the hour was late, and as if in answer, from far down the range rumbled and mumbled low thunder, while pale flashes of lightning shone all over the sky.

The drivers sat their horses and waited. That they were uneasy, that they did not smoke or sit still, proved the abnormality of the hour. They kept close together and spoke often. Brite observed that Reddie seldom let her restless black move a rod away.

The rumble of thunder and the queer flashes might have presaged a storm, but apparently it did not come closer. Brite observed that the singular sheen

became enhanced, if anything. The sultry, drowsy air grew thicker. It had weight. It appeared to settle down over stock and men like a transparent blanket.

Suddenly the sky ripped across with terrific bars of lightning that gave forth a tearing, cracking sound. Rain began to fall, but not in any quantity. Brite waited for the expected clap of thunder. It did not materialize. Then he recognized for a certainty the symptoms of an electrical storm such as had been described to him.

"Boys, we're in for a galvanizin'," he called. "We're as safe heah as anywhars. We cain't do nothin' but take our chance an' try to hold the cattle. But if what's been told me is true they'll be scared still."

"We're heah, Boss," boomed Texas, and a reassuring shout came from Panhandle.

"Oh, Dad!" cried Reddie. "Run yore hand through yore hawss's mane!"

Brite did as bidden, to be startled at a cracking, sizzling sweep of sparks clear to the ears of his horse. He jumped as if he had been shot. Brite did not attempt that again. But he watched Reddie. Electric fluid appeared to play and burn with greenish fire through the black's mane, and run out on the tips of his ears and burst. The obedient horse did not like this, but he held firm, just prancing a little.

"Lass, the air is charged," said Brite fearfully.

"Yes, Dad, an' it's gonna bust!" screamed Reddie as the whole rangeland blazed under the white dome.

Hoarse shouts from the drivers sounded as if wrenched from them. But after that one outburst they kept mute. Brite had involuntarily closed his eyes at the intense flare. Even with his lids tightly shut he saw the lightning flashes. He opened them upon an appalling display across the heavens. Flash after flash illumined the sky, and if thunder followed it was faint and far off. The flashes rose on all sides to and across the zenith, where, fusing in one terrible blaze, they appeared to set fire to the roof of the heavens.

The *remuda* shrank in a shuddering, densely packed mass, too paralyzed to bolt. The cattle froze in their tracks, heads down, lowing piteously.

No longer was there any darkness anywhere. No shadow under the wall! No shadow of horse and rider on the ground! Suddenly the flash lightning shifted to forked lightning—magnificent branched streaks of white fire that ribbed the sky. These were as suddenly succeeded by long, single ropes or chains of lightning.

Gradually the horses drew closer together, if not at the instigation of their riders, then at their own. They rubbed flanks; they hid their heads against each other.

"My Gawd! it's turrible!" cried Texas hoarsely. "We gotta get oot of the way. When this hell's over, thet herd will run mad."

"Tex, they're struck by lightnin'," yelled Holden. "I see cattle down."

"Oot of the narrow place heah, men," shouted Brite.

They moved out into the open valley beyond the constricted neck, and strange to see, the *remuda* followed, the whole drove moving as one horse. They had their heads turned in, so that they really backed away from the wall.

The chain lightnings increased in number, in brilliance, in length and breadth until all in a marvelous instant they coalesced into a sky-wide

canopy of intensest blue too burning for the gaze of man. How long that terrifying phenomenon lasted Brite could not tell, but when, at husky yells of his men, he opened his eyes, the terrific blue blaze of heaven had changed to balls of lightning.

Here was the moment Brite believed he was demented. And these fearless cowhands shared the emotion which beset him. They gaped with protruding eyes at the yellow balls appearing from nowhere, to roll down the walls, to bounce off and burst into crackling sparks. It appeared that balls of fire were shooting in every direction to the prolonged screams of horses in terror.

Brite took the almost fainting Reddie into his arms, and held her tight. He expected death at any instant. Zigzag balls of lightning grew in size and number and rapidity until the ground was crisscrossed with them. They ran together to burst into bits or swell into a larger ball. Then to Brite's horror, to what seemed his distorted vision these fiendish balls ran over the horses, to hang on their ears, to drop off their noses, to roll back and forth along the reins, to leap and poise upon the rim of his sombrero. Yet he was not struck dead, as seemed inevitable.

All at once Brite became aware of heat, intense sulphurous heat, encompassing him like a hot blanket. Coincident with that the rolling, flying balls, like the chains of lightning before them, coalesced with strange sputtering sound into a transparent white fog.

The air reeked with burned sulphur and contained scarcely enough oxygen to keep men and beasts alive. By dint of extreme will power Brite kept from falling off his horse with Reddie unconscious in his arms. The men coughed as if half strangled. They were bewildered. The herd had been swallowed up in this pale mysterious medium. The hissing, crackling sound of sparks had ceased.

Slowly that fog lifted like a curtain to disclose to Brite's eyes the dark forms of horses and riders. Cooler air took the place of the heat. A vast trampling stir ran through the herd. It seemed likewise to revivify the trail drivers.

"Pards, air we in hell?" shouted Texas huskily. "Or air we oot?— Boys, it's passed away! We're alive to tell the tale! Ho! Ho! Brite's ootfit on the Canadian! The herd's millin', boys!—Bear in!—Ride 'em, cowboys! By Gawd! our luck is great!—Not bad, but great! An' shore we're drivin' on to Dodge! Ride 'em, men!—Charge an' shoot to kill! The night's gone an' the day's busted."

"*Hi! Hi! Hi! Hi!*" screamed the drivers as they drove the leaders back.

In the gray of dawn Brite supported the swaying Reddie in her saddle back to camp.

"Oh, Dad—my *remuda!*—where air they?" she sobbed.

"Inside, lass, inside thet line of fire-eaters," replied the old cattleman. "An' they'll hold!"

Only the reality of the sunrise, the calm morning with its sweet clarified air, the solid earth under their feet and the grazing stock, could ever have dispelled the nightmare of those hours of brimstone.

Texas Joe rode in to fall off his horse and limp to the campfire. He stretched wide his long arms, as if to embrace the fresh sweetness of the dawn.

"On our way, men! The herd's pointed," he called, his voice thick and

shaky. "Gimme aboot a gallon of coffee if there ain't any likker." He fell on a pack, favoring his lame leg. "Wal, my sins air shore wiped oot. All the hell I ever deserved I got last night."

Five watchful, strenuous, endless days later Brite's outfit drove across the North Fork of the Canadian River to camp on Rabbit Ear Creek.

The day before they had passed Camp Supply in the middle of the morning. Texas Joe was too wise to make a halt. Brite rode in with the chuck wagon.

This camp was teeming with soldiers, Indians, cowhands, and bearded men of no apparent occupation. It was also teeming with rumors of the massacre of the wagon train Hardy had hoped to join at Fort Sill, of trail herds north and south, of bands of rustlers operating in Kansas and rendezvousing in the Indian Territory, of twenty million buffalo between the Canadian and Arkansas rivers, of hell itself let loose in Dodge and Abilene. Brite had kept all this to himself. The boys were somber enough, and somehow they might make the drive through.

"Aboot what time is it?" asked Whittaker dreamily, as some of them sat in camp.

"Sundown, yu locoed galoot," retorted Ackerman.

"Shore. But I mean the month an' day."

"Gawd only knows—an' *I* don't care."

"I'll bet my spurs Holden can figger it oot. He's a queer duck. But I like him heaps. Don't yu?"

"Cain't say thet I do," returned Deuce gruffly. Brite had noted more than once how devoted the Uvalde cowboys had been to each other, and how Ackerman appeared jealous of his partner Little, now that the others were gone. Loss of San Sabe had been hard on Deuce.

"Wal, I'll ask him, anyhow," went on Whittaker. "Less," he shouted, "can yu figger oot what day this is?"

"Shore. I'm a walkin' calendar," rejoined Holden with self-satisfied air, as he pulled a tobacco pouch from his pocket. "But don't tell Tex. He says to hell with when an' where it is." He emptied a handful of pebbles out of the bag and began carefully to count them. When he had concluded he said: "Gosh, but they add up! Fifty-six—fifty-six days oot an' today makes fifty-seven. Boys, we're just three days shy of bein' two months on the trail."

"Is thet all!" ejaculated Whittaker.

"Then it's near August?" queried Ackerman ponderingly. "We ought to make Dodge by the end of August. I wonder aboot thet Fort Sill wagon train—Boss, I forgot to ask yu. Did yu heah any word of thet wagon train Doan expected from Fort Sill?"

Brite could not look into the lad's dark, eager eyes and tell the truth.

Next day, halfway to Sand Creek, Texas Joe stood up in his stirrups and signaled the news of buffalo. Day after day this had been expected. Somewhere north of the Canadian the great herd would swing across the Chisholm Trail.

Soon Brite saw the dark, ragged, broken lines of buffalo. They appeared scarcely to move, yet after an interval, when he looked again, the straggling ends were closer. Texas Joe halted for dry camp early in the day. What little conversation prevailed around the fire centered on the buffalo.

"Nothin' to fear drivin' along with the buffs," vouchsafed Bender.

"Thet's all yu know."

"Wal, mebbe they'll work back west

by mawnin'."

"But s'pose they keep on workin' east—acrost our trail?"

"Trail drivers never turn back."

"An' we could be swallered up by miles of buffalo—cattle, hawsses, chuck wagon, riders an' all?"

"I reckon we could— Boss, did yu ever heah of thet?"

"Of what?" asked Brite, though he had heard plainly enough.

"Ootfit gettin' surrounded by buffalo."

"Shore I have. Thet happens often. Stock grazin' right along with the buffalo."

"Ahuh. Wal, what'd happen if the buffalo stampeded? Thirty million buffalo all movin' at once?"

"Hell, cowboy! It ain't conceivable."

"I'll bet my last cigarette it happens."

So they talked, some of them optimistically, others the opposite, all of them reckless, unafraid, and unchangeable. Morning disclosed long black strings of buffalo crossing the trail ahead.

All day Brite's herd had shaggy monsters for company, short lines, long thin strings, bunches and groups, hundreds and twos and fours of buffalo, leisurely grazing along, contented and indifferent. Sand Creek offered a fine camp site and range for cattle. The mossy-horns appeared as satisfied as their shaggy brothers. They bedded down early and offered no trouble. The guards slept in their saddles.

All next day the trail followed Sand Creek. The drivers were concerned about the booming of needle guns to the east and south. Hunters on the outskirts of the herd or trail drivers coming! That day a long, black, thick line of buffalo crossed behind Brite's herd, and turning north, crept along parallel with it. This line had no break. Behind and to the west the black wave, like a tide of broken lava, rolling imperceptibly, slowly augmented and encroached upon the cattle herd. How insignificant and puny that herd of six thousand longhorns now! It was but a drop in the bucket of the Great Plains.

But the west and north remained open, at least as far as eye could see. Brite thought he had crossed directly in front of the mass of buffalo. They might travel that tranquil way for days; and again the whirl of a dust devil, the whip of a swallow on the wing, might stampede them into a stupendous, rolling avalanche.

Sand Creek merged into Buffalo Creek, a deep, cool, willow-bordered stream where all the luxuriant foliage of the prairie bloomed. Texas made camp at the point where the creeks met.

"We'll rest up heah a day or two," he said. "Somebody knock over a buffalo. Rump steak would shore go great. Reddie, do yu want to kill a buff?"

"No. I'm too tender-hearted," she replied musingly. "I see so many cute little buffalo calves. I might shoot one's mother."

"Tender-hearted? Wal, I'm dog-goned!" drawled Texas mildly. He had greatly sobered these late days of the drive and seldom returned to his old raillery. "We-all had it figgered yu was a killer."

"Aw, I don't count redskins, greasers, stampeders—an' now an' then an occasional cowhand."

"I savvy. But I meant a killer with yore gun—not yore red curls, yore snappin' eyes, yore shape thet no boys' pants could hide."

Reddie promptly vanished physically and vocally into the empty air. That

was all the pleasantry in camp on this night.

"I wish thet Hash Williams had stuck with us," Texas mused.

"But, Tex, what the hell difference does it make now?"

"Wal, a lot, if we knowed what the pesky buffs would do."

"Ump-umm! I say, since we gotta drive on, to keep goin'."

"But mebbe the buffalo might drift by."

"What? Thet herd? Never this summer. They are as many as the tufts of grama grass."

"What yu think, Boss?" queried the foreman, showing that he needed partisanship to bolster up any of his judgments.

"Wait till mawnin'," advised the cattle owner.

Certainly the morning brought to light fewer buffalo and wider space, yet to east and south and west the black lines encroached upon the green. Only the north was clear.

"Point the herd!" ordered Brite.

"I was gonna do thet, anyhow," drawled Texas Joe. "We can only die once, an' if we have to die let's get it over. This dyin' by days an' hours is like tryin' to win a woman's love."

If Joe had but known it—if he could have seen the light in Reddie's eyes as Brite saw it—he would have learned that that could be attained by the very things he thought so little of.

So they drove on and the buffalo closed in black all around them. Herd, *remuda*, and riders occupied the center of a green island surrounded by rugged, unbroken waves. This island was a couple of miles long by about the same in width, almost a circle. It kept that way for hours of suspense to the drivers.

Longhorns had no fear of buffalo. Brite remembered how the mossy-horned old bulls bawled and tossed their mighty horns at sight of buffalo coming close. But to the vast herd these cattle and horses were grains of dust under their feet.

About noon there came a change. Something quickened the buffalo. Brite felt it, saw it, but could give no solution. Buffalo were beyond understanding.

"Oh, Dad, I heah somethin' behind!" called Reddie fearfully.

"What?"

"I don't know. It's like the wind in the pines."

Brite strained his ears to hear. In vain! The noonday hour was silent, oppressive, warm with the breath of midsummer. But he saw Texas halt his horse, to turn and stand in his stirrups, gazing back. He, too, had heard something. Brite looked behind him. The buffalo were a mile in the rear, ambling along, no longer nipping the grass. The shaggy line bobbed almost imperceptibly.

"Dad, I heah it again," cried Reddie.

Panhandle rode around the rear of the cattle, to gallop ahead and join Texas. They watched. Other cowboys turned their faces back. Something was amiss. The cattle grazed along as if buffalo were not encompassing them. But the little Spanish mustangs evinced uneasiness. They trotted to and fro, stood with pointed ears, heads to the south. They had the heritage of two hundred years of prairie life. At sight of them Brite's heart sank. He tried to stem the stream of his consciousness and not think.

"There it comes, stronger," declared Reddie, who had ridden to Brite's side.

"What yu make of it, lass?"

"Like low thunder now—mebbe a storm brewin'."

The sky, however, was cloudless, a serene azure vault, solemn and austere, keeping its secrets. Miles back, low down over the black horizon of shaggy, uneven line, a peculiar yellow, billowy smoke was rising. Dust clouds! Brite would rather have been blind than have been compelled to see that.

"Look! Dust risin'!" cried Reddie, startled. She pointed with shaking hand.

"Mebbe it's nothin' to worry aboot," said Brite, averting his eyes.

"An' heah comes Tex. Look at thet hawss!"

The foreman swerved in round the rear of the herd to meet the three riders who rode toward him. After a short consultation one of these galloped off to the east, to round the herd on that side. Texas then came on at a run.

He reined in before Brite and Reddie, who had stopped involuntarily. Texas Joe's face was a bronze mask. His amber eyes were narrow slits of fire.

"Heah anythin', Boss?" he queried sharply.

"Nope. But Reddie does. I see some dust rollin' up behind."

"*Stampede!*" flashed the cowboy, confirming Brite's suspicion.

"Oh, my Gawd!" burst out Reddie, suddenly realizing. "We're trapped in a circle— Jack, what will we do?"

"It's been comin' to us all this drive," replied Texas. "An' I reckon now it's heah. If thet stampede back there spreads through the whole herd we've got about one chance in a thousand. An' thet chance is for our cattle to run bunched as they air now, square an' broad across the rear. Ride behind thet, Mr. Brite, an' good luck to yu. Reddie, if the buffs close in on yu, take to the wagon. A big white heavy wagon like ours might split a herd thet'd trample over hawsses."

"Oh, Jack—don't go—till I—" she flung after him. But Texas only turned to wave good-by, then he rode on to meet Moze. That worthy was coming at a stiff trot. They met, and Texas must have imparted alarming orders, for the Negro put the team to a lope that promised shortly to overtake the *remuda*. Texas wheeled back to the left.

Brite and Reddie drove the *remuda* to the rear of the herd, just back of the riders. Soon Moze came lumbering up. Then all accommodated their paces to the movement of the cattle and maintained their position. All of the seven guards now rode at the rear of the herd.

As soon as this change was established Brite took stock of the buffalo. Apparently the immense green oval inside the herd was just as big as ever. But had it narrowed or shortened? He could not be sure. Yet there was a difference. On all sides the buffalo line bobbed at a slow walk. All still seemed well.

Brite tried to get his nerve back. But it had been shaken. A terrible peril hung over them. At the last word he did not care particularly about himself, though the idea of being ridden down and pounded by millions of hoofs into a bloody pulp was horrible, but he suffered poignantly for Reddie and her lover, and these tried and true men who had stood by him so loyally. But God disposed of all. Brite framed a prayer for them, and then like a true Texan prepared to fight to the last bitter gasp.

This enabled him to look back to

make out what to expect and how soon. No change in the buffalo. But that yellow, rolling cloud had arisen high, to blot out the sky halfway to the zenith.

All of a sudden Brite realized that for a moment or perhaps longer he had been aware of a filling of his ears with distant sound.

"Reddie!" he yelled. "I heah it!"

To his amazement, the girl had gravitated toward Texas Joe, who had ridden around the *remuda* to approach her. They met, and his forceful gesture sent Reddie back alongside the wagon.

There was no more need for words. Still Brite's stubbornness refused to yield to the worst. Had not some vital, unforeseen chance saved them more than once on this fatal drive? "*Quien sabe?*" he muttered through his teeth.

On each flank the buffalo had markedly changed in aspect. Where before they had wagged along, now they bobbed. Far ahead the forward mass had not yet caught this acceleration. From behind, the low roar gradually increased. Brite's mustang snorted and balked. He had to be spurred. All the horses betrayed a will to bolt. The *remuda* pranced at the heels of the herd, held in on each flank by the riders.

That state of action and sound stayed the same for moments. It was Texas's strange throwing up of his hands that acquainted Brite with a transformation. The buffalo had broken into a lope. An instant later that low roar perished in an engulfing sound that would have struck terror to the stoutest heart. The gap between the rear of the herd and the oncoming buffalo began rapidly to close. Louder grew the roar. On each side of the cattle, far ahead, the buffalo closed in, so that the shape of a great triangle was maintained. It would be impossible for the cattle to mix with the buffalo. An impenetrable, shaggy wall moved on all sides.

Before the advancing mass behind had caught up to Brite the nimble-footed longhorns broke into a swinging lope. That seemed well. It evened matters. The *remuda* appeared less likely to bolt. Moze kept the chuck wagon rolling at their heels.

Above the steady roar of hoofs all around swelled a sound that swallowed it—the deafening thunder of the stampede in the rear. It had started the herd into action. But now its momentum forced the buffalo ahead again to break their pace. Like a wave rolling onward in the sea it caught up with the cattle, passed through the buffalo on each flank, and raced forward to the leaders.

Brite realized the terrible instant when the stampede spirit claimed the whole mass. He felt the ground shake with his horse, and his ears cracked to an awful rumble. It ceased as suddenly. He could no longer hear. And as if of one accord, the longhorns and the horses broke into a run.

Brite looked back. A thousand hideously horned and haired heads close-pressed together formed the advance line fifty yards or less behind him. Only gradually did they gain now. Before this moment the pursuing buffalo had split to go on each side of the cattle herd.

For miles the fleet longhorns evened pace with the shaggy monsters of the plains. And in that short while the circle closed. Buffalo raced cows and did not win. The wicked longhorned bulls charged the black wall of woolly hides, to be bowled over and trampled underfoot.

The conformation of the land must

have changed from level to grade. Brite's distended eyes saw a vast sea of black ahead, a sweeping tide, like a flood of fur covering the whole prairie. No doubt it was the same on each side of him and for miles behind. Even in that harrowing moment he was staggered by the magnificence of the spectacle. Nature had staged a fitting end for his heroic riders. Texas Joe, on one side of the chuck wagon, Panhandle on the other, rode with guns belching fire and smoke into the faces of bulls that charged perilously close. Moze's team was running away, the *remuda* was running away, the six thousand cattle were running away. But where? They were lost in that horde of bison. They were as a few grains of sand on the seashore.

When the buffalo filled all the gaps, dust obscured Brite's vision. He could see only indistinctly and not far. Yet he never lost sight of Reddie or the wagon. Any moment he expected the wagon to lurch over or to lose a wheel in one of its bounces, and to see Moze go down to his death. But that would be the fate of them all.

Only the *remuda* hung together. Except Panhandle, Texas, and Reddie, all the riders were surrounded by buffalo. Brite's stirrups rubbed the humpbacked monsters; they bumped his mustang on one side, then on the other.

Bender on his white horse was a conspicuous mark. Brite saw him forced to one side—saw the white horse go down and black bodies cover the place. Brite could feel no more. He closed his eyes. He could not see Reddie sacrificed to such a ghastly fate and care to endure himself.

The hellish stampede went on—a catastrophe which perhaps a gopher had started. A violent jolt all but unseated Brite. He opened his eyes to see a giant bull passing. Yielding to furious fright, Brite shot the brute. It rolled on the ground and the huge beasts leaped over or aside. Sometimes Brite could see patches of ground. But all was yellow, infernal haze, obscuring shadows, and ceaseless appalling motion. It must have an end. The cattle could run all day, but the terrorized horses would fall as had Bender's.

Yet there were Reddie and Texas, sweeping along beside the wagon, with buffalo only on the outside. Farther on through the yellow pall, Brite made out white and gray against the black. A magenta sun burned through the dust. Sick and dizzy and reeling, Brite clung to his saddle horn, sure that his end was near. He had lived long. Cattle had been his Nemesis. If it had not been for Reddie—

Suddenly his clogged ears appeared to open—to fill again with sound. He could hear once more. His dazed brain answered to the revivifying suggestion. If he was no longer deaf, the roar of the stampede had diminished. The mustang broke his gait to allow for down grade. Rifts of sky shone through the yellow curtain. A gleam of river! Heart and sense leaped. They had reached the Cimarron. All went dark before Brite's eyes. But consciousness rallied. The terrible trampling roar was still about him. His horse dragged in sand. A rude arm clasped him and a man bawled in his ear.

Brite gazed stupidly out upon the broad river where strings of cattle were wading out upon an island. To right and left black moving bands crossed the water. The stampede had ended at the Cimarron where the buffalo had split around an island.

"How—aboot—Reddie?" whispered the cattleman as they lifted him out of the saddle.

"Heah, Dad, safe an' sound. Don't yu feel me?" came as if from a distance.

"An'—everybody?"

"All heah but Bender an' Whittaker. They were lost."

"Aw! I seen Bender—go down."

"Boss, it could have been wuss," said Texas gratefully.

"Oh, Dad! Did yu see me go down?" cried Reddie. "I got pitched ahaid—over my hawss. Thet cowboy snatched me up—as if I'd been his scarf."

"Which cowboy?" queried Brite.

"Texas—Jack. Thet's the second time—shore."

"Boss, we're stuck," reported the practical Texas, brushing Reddie aside. "Some of our cattle went with the buffalo. The rest is scattered. Our *remuda* half gone. But, by Gawd! we're heah on the Cimarron! When these cussed buffs get by we'll round up our stock an' drive on."

Before dark the last straggling ends of the buffalo herd loped by. Meanwhile camp had been made on high ground. Two of the riders were repairing the wagon. Moze was cooking rump steak. Panhandle labored zealously at cleaning his guns. Texas Joe strode here and there, his restless eyes ever seeking Reddie, who lay on the green grass beside Brite. The outfit had weathered another vicissitude of the trail.

It took Brite's remaining riders four days to round up five thousand head of cattle. The rest were lost, and a hundred head of the *remuda*. And the unbeatable cowboys kept telling Brite that he had still five hundred more longhorns than the number with which he had started.

Trail herds crossed the Cimarron every day, never less than two, and often more, and once five herds. The rush was on. Good luck had attended most of the drivers. A brush with Nigger Horse, a few stampedes, a bad electrical storm that caused delay, hailstones that killed yearling calves—these were reports given by the passing drivers.

A huge cowhand, red of face and ragged of garb, hailed the members of Brite's outfit in camp.

"On the last laig to Dodge! I'll be drunker'n hell soon," he yelled, and waved his hand.

Brite got going again on the fifth day, with cattle and *remuda* rested, but with his cowboys ragged as scarecrows, gaunt and haggard, wearing out in all except their unquenchable spirit.

They had company at every camp. Snake Creek, Salt Creek, Bear Creek, Bluff Creek, and at last Mulberry Creek, only a few miles out of Dodge.

That night the sun went down gloriously golden and red over the vast, level prairie. Ranchers called on the trail drivers.

"Dodge is shore a-hummin' these days," said one. "Shootin', drinkin', gamblin'! They're waitin' for yu boys—them painted women an' black-coated caird sharps."

"*Whoopee!*" yelled the cowboys in lusty passion. But Deuce Ackerman was silent. Texas Joe took a sly look at the downcast Reddie, and with a wink at Brite he drawled:

"Gosh! I'm glad I'm free. Just a no-good cowhand in off the Trail with all the hell behind! Boss, I want my pay pronto. I'll buck the tiger. I'll stay sober till I bore thet rustler Hite. Then me for one of them hawk-eyed girls with a pale face an' painted lips an' bare arms an'—"

"Yes, yu *air* a no-good cowhand," blazed Reddie furiously. "Oh, I—I'm ashamed of yu. I—I hate yu! To give in to the bottle—to some vile hussy—when—when all the time our boys—our comrades lay daid oot there on the prairie. How can yu—do—it?"

"Thet's why, Reddie," replied Texas Joe, suddenly flayed. "It shore takes a hell of a lot to make a man forget the pards who died for him— An' I have nothin' else but likker an' a painted—"

"Oh, but yu have!" she cried in ringing passion. "Yu fool! Yu fool!"

Chapter Sixteen

Trail's End

DODGE CITY was indeed roaring. Brite likened the traffic in the wide street, the dust, the noise, the tramp of the throng to a stampede of cattle on the trail.

After the drive in to the pastures, and the count, Brite had left the cowboys and the wagon, and had ridden to town with Reddie. He had left her asleep in her room at the hotel, where she had succumbed at sight of a bed. He hurried to the office of Hall and Stevens, with whom he had had dealings before. He was welcomed with the eagerness of men who smelled a huge deal with like profit.

"Brite, you're a ragamuffin," declared the senior member of the firm. "Why didn't you rid yourself of that beard? And those trail togs?"

"Tomorrow is time enough for thet. I want to sell an' go to bed. What're yu payin' this month?"

"We're offerin' twelve dollars," replied the cattle buyer warily.

"Not enough. My count is five thousand an eighty-eight. Call it eighty even. Fine stock an' fairly fat."

"What do you want?"

"Fifteen dollars."

"Won't pay it. Brite, there are eighty thousand head of cattle in."

"Nothin' to me, Mr. Hall. I have the best stock."

"Thirteen dollars."

"Nope. I'll run over to see Blackwell," replied Brite, moving toward the door.

"Fourteen. That's my highest. Will you sell?"

"Done. I'll call tomorrow sometime for a certified check. Meanwhile send yore cowhands down to take charge."

"Thanks, Brite. I'm satisfied if you are. Cattle movin' brisk. How many head will come up the Trail before the snow flies?"

"Two hundred thousand."

Hall rubbed his hands. "Dodge will be wide open about the end of August."

"What is it now? I'm goin' to get oot quick."

"Won't you need some cash to pay off?"

"Shore. I forgot. Make it aboot two thousand five hundred. Good day."

Brite wrestled his way back to the hotel, landing there out of breath and ready to drop. He paid a Negro porter five dollars to pack up a tub of water. Then he took a bath, shaved, and went to bed, asleep before he hit the pillow.

What seemed but a moment later a knocking at his door awakened him.

"Dad, air yu daid?" called a voice that thrilled him.

"Come in."

Reddie entered, pale, with hollow eyes and strained cheeks, but sweet to gaze upon. She sat down upon the bed beside him.

"Yu handsome man! All clean shaved an' nice. Did yu buy new clothes?"

"Not yet. I left thet till this mawnin'."

"It's ten o'clock. When did yu go to bed?"

"At six. Sixteen hours! Oh, I was daid to the world."

"Where is—air the boys?"

"Also daid asleep. Don't worry. They'll straggle in late today, lookin' for money."

"Dad, do me a favor?"

"Shore. Anythin' yu want."

"Don't give the cowboys—at least Texas Jack—any money right away."

"But, honey, I cain't get oot of it," protested Brite, puzzled. "Soon as he comes heah."

"Will he want to—to get drunk—as he bragged an'—an'—" She dropped her head to the pillow beside Brite's.

"Shore. They'll all get drunk."

"Could I keep Jack from thet?" she whispered.

"I reckon yu could. But it'll cost a lot. Do yu care enough aboot him, lass?"

"Oh! I—I love him!"

"Wal, then, it'll be easy, for thet fire-eatin' hombre loves the ground yu ride on."

"Have I yore consent?"

"Why, child!"

"But yu're my dad. I cain't remember my real one."

"Yu have my blessin', dear. An' I think the world of Texas Joe. He's the salt of the earth."

"Could yu let him quit trail drivin'? Because if he drove I'd have to go, too."

"Reddie, I got a fortune for thet herd. Which reminds me I still have ninety-two hawsses to sell."

"But yu cain't sell mine."

"We'll leave him with Selton, to be sent south with the first ootfit."

She leaped up, flushed and happy, with tears like pearls on her tanned cheeks and eyes of sweet, thoughtful shadows.

"Hurry. Get up an' dress. Take me oot to buy things. A girl's! Oh, I will not know what to buy. It's like a dream! Hurry, Dad. I wouldn't dare go alone."

"I should smile yu wouldn't."

When she ran out Brite made short work of getting into his torn and trail-stained rags. Soon they were on their way down the main street of Dodge. It presented a busy scene, but the roar was missing. Too early in the day! Reddie was all eyes. She missed nothing. Cowboys, gamblers, teamsters, Negroes, Mexicans, Indians, lined the street, waiting for something to begin.

Brite took Reddie into Denman's big merchandise store, where he turned her over to a woman clerk to give her the best of everything and not consider expense. Then he hastened to purchase an outfit for himself. That did not require long, but he encountered a trail driver, Lewis by name, and in exchanging experiences time flew by. Hurrying back, he found Reddie dazed and happy, sitting amid a circle of parcels. They had a merry and a toilsome job packing their purchases back to the hotel. Reddie barred herself in with her precious possessions.

Some time later a tap on Brite's door interrupted the finishing-touches of his dressing.

"Come in," he answered.

Texas Joe entered, his lean, handsome face shining despite its havoc.

"Mawnin', Boss," he drawled. "My, but yu're spruced up fine."

"Yes, an' yu'll be feelin' like me pronto. How're the boys?"

"I don't know. Asleep, I reckon. They come in town to go to bed. I'll find them some place."

"Where's Panhandle?"

"Sleepin' to quiet his nerves. Boss, he'll be lookin' for Hite before the day's oot."

"Tex, if I asked yu as a particular favor, would yu give up goin' on a debauch an' take first stage with me an' Reddie?"

"Boss, yu're askin' too much. Somethin' turrible, or mebbe wonderful, has gotta come between me an' thet hell-rattlin' drive."

"I understand. But do this for me. Go with me to Hall's office, then to the bank. An' I'll take yu to the store where I bought this ootfit,"

"Thet's easy. I'll stick to yu shore till I get my money. Clean broke, Boss. Not a two-bit piece. An' I had some money when we left Santone. My Gawd! will I ever see thet town again?"

"Shore yu will. Come on."

They went out into the street. "Boss, would yu mind walkin' on my left side? I might have to clear for action, yu know. If we meet Hite—wal! our pard Pan is gonna be left."

But nothing happened on their several errands. Upon returning to the hotel, Texas engaged a room and proceeded to get rid of the stains and rags of the Chisholm Trail. Brite went to Blackwell, where he sold the *remuda* for twenty dollars a head. He was treading the clouds when he got back to the hotel. Cattlemen he knew engaged him in spirited inquiry about the resourcefulness of Texas. Men and women, some of them flashily dressed, passed through the lobby to the dining-room. Brite noted a very pretty young lady, in gayly colorful array, pass to and fro as if on parade. He observed that she had attracted the attention of a frock-coated gambler. And when he accosted her, Brite decided he had better make sure the girl wanted this kind of attention. When he strode over, what was his consternation to hear the girl say in a sharp familiar voice:

"Heah, Mr. Flowery Vest, if I was packin' my gun I'd shoot yore laig off!"

"*Reddie!*" burst out Brite, beside himself.

"Hello, Dad. An' yu didn't know me! Lend me yore gun."

The gambler fled. Brite gazed speechless at his adopted daughter, unable to believe his own sight.

"Reddie, darlin', is it yu?"

"Shore it's me. Thet is, I think an' feel it is 'cept when I look in thet mirror. Oh, Dad! I feel so strange—so tormented—so *happy*. Thet woman was smart. She picked oot all these things for me. Do I look—nice?"

"Nice! Reddie, yu air the sweetest thing I ever seen. I am knocked flat. I am so glad I could bust. An' to think yu're my lass."

"I'd hug yu—if we was anywhere else. Dad, will *he* like me—this way?"

"He! Who?"

"Texas Jack, of course."

"Like yu? He'll fall on his knees if yu give him a chance."

"Oh!" She started, with dark bright eyes widening. "There's Texas now. Oh, I hardly knew him. Dad, stand by me now. I wouldn't say my happiness is at stake—or all of it—but my love is. If I've only got—the nerve—"

"Remember Wallen, honey, an' thet day of the stampede," was all Brite had time to say, when Texas Joe transfixed him and Reddie in one lightning flash of falcon eyes.

"Boss! Who—who—"

"Jack, don't yu know me?" Reddie asked roguishly. Brite marveled at the woman of her—so swift to gain mastery over her weakness.

"For Gawd's sake!" gasped Texas.

"Come, Jack," she cried, clasping his arm and then Brite's, and dragging them away. "We'll go up to Dad's room. I've somethin' to say—to yu."

All the way up the stairs and down the hall Texas Joe seemed in a trance. But Reddie talked about the town, the people, the joy of their deliverance from the bondage of the trail. Then they were in Brite's room with the door shut.

Reddie subtly changed. She tossed her dainty bonnet on the bed as if she had been used to such finery all her life.

"Jack, do yu like me?" she asked sweetly, facing him with great dark eyes aglow, and she turned round for his benefit.

"Yu're staggerin'-lovely, Reddie," he replied. "I'd never have knowed yu."

"This ootfit is better then them tight pants I used to wear?"

"Better! Child, yu're a boy no more," he said wistfully. "Yu're a girl—a lady. An' no one who knowed yu would want to see yu go back now."

"Yu'd never dare spank me in this dress, would yu?"

Texas flushed red to the roots of his tawny hair. "Gawd, no! An' I never did spank yu as a girl."

"Yes, yu did. Yu knew me. Yu saw me bathin' in the creek thet day—naked! Don't yu dare deny thet."

It was a torturing moment for Texas and he seemed on the rack.

"Never mind. I forgive yu. Who knows? Mebbe but for thet— Jack, heah is what I want to say—will yu give up goin' on a drunk?"

"Sorry, Miss Bayne, but I cain't. Thet's a trail driver's privilege. An' any human bein' wouldn't ask him not to drown it all."

"Not even for me?"

"I reckon—not even for yu."

She slowly drew close to him, as white as if sun and wind had never tanned her face, and her dark purple eyes shone wondrously.

"If I kiss yu—will yu give it up? Once yu begged for a kiss."

Texas laughed mirthlessly. "Funny, thet idee. *Yu* kissin' *me!*"

"Not so funny, Jack," she flashed, and seizing his coat in strong hands, she almost leaped at his lips. Then she fell back, released him, sank momentarily against him, and stepped back. Texas Joe, with corded jaw in restraint, bent eyes of amber fire upon her. They had forgotten Brite or were indifferent to his presence.

"Wal, yu did it. Yu kissed me. An' I'm ashamed of yu for it. Reddie Bayne, yu cain't buy my freedom with a kiss."

"Oh, Jack, it's not yore freedom I want to buy. It's yore salvation."

"Bah! What's life to me?" he retorted, stern-lipped and somber-eyed. "I want to carouse, to fight, to kill, to sleep drunk—drunk—drunk."

"I know, Jack. Oh, I think I understand. Wasn't I a trail driver, too? An' do I want these awful things? No! No! An' I want to save yu from them. Yu madden me with yore cold— Jack, spare me an' end it—quick."

"I'm sparin' yu more'n yu know, little lady," he replied, darkly passionate.

"Shore *somethin'* will coax yu oot of this hell-givin' idee— What? I'll do anythin'—anythin'—"

He seized her in strong arms and lifted her off her feet against his breast. "Yu'd marry me?"

"Oh yes—yes—yes!"

"But why, girl? *Why?*" he demanded in a frenzy of doubt.

Reddie flung her arms around his neck and strained to reach and kiss his quivering cheek. "'Cause I love yu, Jack—so turrible!"

"Yu love me, Reddie Bayne?"

"I do. I do."

"Since—when?" he whispered, playing with his joy.

"Thet day—when Wallen came—an' yu—saved me."

He kissed her hair, her brow, her scarlet cheek, and at last the uplifted mouth.

"Aw, Reddie!—Aw! It was worth goin' through—all thet hell—for this. Girl, yu've got to kill the devil in me—When will yu marry me?"

"Today—if yu—must have me," she whispered faintly. "But I—I'd rather wait—till we get back to Dad's—to Santone, my home."

"Then we'll wait," he rang out passionately. "But we must leave today, darlin'. This Dodge town is brewin' blood for me."

"Oh, let's hurry," she cried, and slipping out of his arms she turned appealingly to Brite. "Dad, it's all settled. We've made up. When can yu take us away?"

"Today, an' pronto, by thunder," replied Brite heartily. "Pack yore old duds an' go to the stage office at the east end of the street. We've got plenty of time. But go there pronto. It's a safer place to wait. I will pay off an' rustle to meet yu there."

Brite spent a fruitless hour trying to locate the cowboys. Upon returning to the hotel, with the intention of leaving their wages, as well as their share of the money found on the stampeder Wallen, he encountered Panhandle, vastly changed in garb and face.

"Hullo, Pan. Lookin' for yu. Heah's yore wages as a trail driver an' yore share—"

"Brite, yu don't owe me anythin'," returned the gunman, smiling.

"Heah! None of thet or we're not friends," retorted Brite, forcing the money upon him. "I'm leavin' in an hour by stage with Tex an' Reddie. They made it up, an' we're all happy."

"Fine! I'm shore glad. I'll go to the stage to see yu off."

"Pan, hadn't yu better go with us, far as Abilene, anyway?"

"Wal, no, much as I'd like to. I've somebody to see heah yet."

"Wal, I'm sorry. Will yu take this wad of bills an' pay off those fire-eaters of mine?"

"Shore will. But they're heah, just round on the side porch."

"Let's get thet over, pronto," said Brite fervently. Strange how he wanted to see the last of these faithful boys!

Holden sat on the porch steps, while Ackerman and Little leaned arm in arm on the rail. They still wore their ragged trail garb, minus the chaps, but their faces were clean and bright from recent contact with razor and soap.

"Howdy, Boss. Got any money?" asked Rolly lazily, with a grin.

"Shore. I have it heah waitin' for yu—wages an' bonus, too. Thet share of Wallen's money amounts to more'n all yore wages."

"Boss, I'm gonna take ten to blow in, an' want yu to put the rest in somebody's hands to keep for me," said Ackerman, keenly. "Yu know I'm not trailin' back to Texas. I'm waitin' here to join the Hardys."

"We'll miss you, Deuce."

Brite gave the boys their wages, and

then, bidding them good-by and good luck, left the hotel with Pan. He noticed that Pan walked on the inside and quite apart.

They passed Beatty and Kelly's store, out from under an awning into the light. A dark-garbed man strode out of the barbershop.

"*Jump!*" hissed Panhandle.

Even as Brite acted upon that trenchant word his swift eye swept to the man in front of the door. Sallow face, baleful eyes, crouching form—Ross Hite reaching for his gun!

Then Brite's dive took him out of vision. As he plunged off the sidewalk two shots boomed out, almost together. A heavy bullet spanged off the gravel in the street.

Lunging up, Brite leaped forward. Then he saw Panhandle standing erect, his smoking gun high, while Hite stretched across the threshold of the barbershop door.

A rush of feet, excited cries, a loud laugh, then Panhandle bent a little, wrenching his gaze from his fallen adversary. He sheathed his gun and strode on to join Brite. They split the gathering crowd and hurried down the street. Dodge roared on, but in lessening volume.

Breathless with haste and agitation, Brite reached the stage office.

"Waitin' for yu, Boss," drawled Texas Joe from inside the big stagecoach. "Wal, yu're all winded. Yu needn't have rustled. I'd kept this stage driver heah."

"Oh, Dad, I was afraid," cried Reddie, leaning out with fair face flushed.

"Doggone! Heah's Panhandle, too," exclaimed Texas. "Shore was fine of yu to come down to say good-by."

Panhandle coolly lighted a cigarette with fingers as steady as a rock. He smiled up at Reddie.

"Lass, I shore had to wish yu all the joy an' happiness there is in this hard old West."

"Thank yu, Pan," she replied shyly. "I wish—"

"All aboard thet's goin'," yelled the stage driver from his seat.

Brite threw his bag in and followed, tripping as he entered. The strong hand that had assisted him belonged to Panhandle, who stepped in after him. Then the stagecoach lurched and rolled away.

"Wal, now, Pan, where's yore baggage?" drawled Texas Joe, his eyes narrowing.

"Tex, I reckon all I've got is on my hip," replied Panhandle, his glance meeting that of Texas Joe.

"Ahuh. Wal, I'm darn glad yu're travelin' with us."

"Oh, Dad, yu didn't forget to say good-by to the boys for me, especially to Deuce, who'll never come back to Texas?"

"No, Reddie, I didn't forget," replied Brite.

"I hope Ann can coax Deuce never again to be a trail driver," concluded Reddie happily, as she smiled up at Texas Joe. "I'd shore like to tell her how."

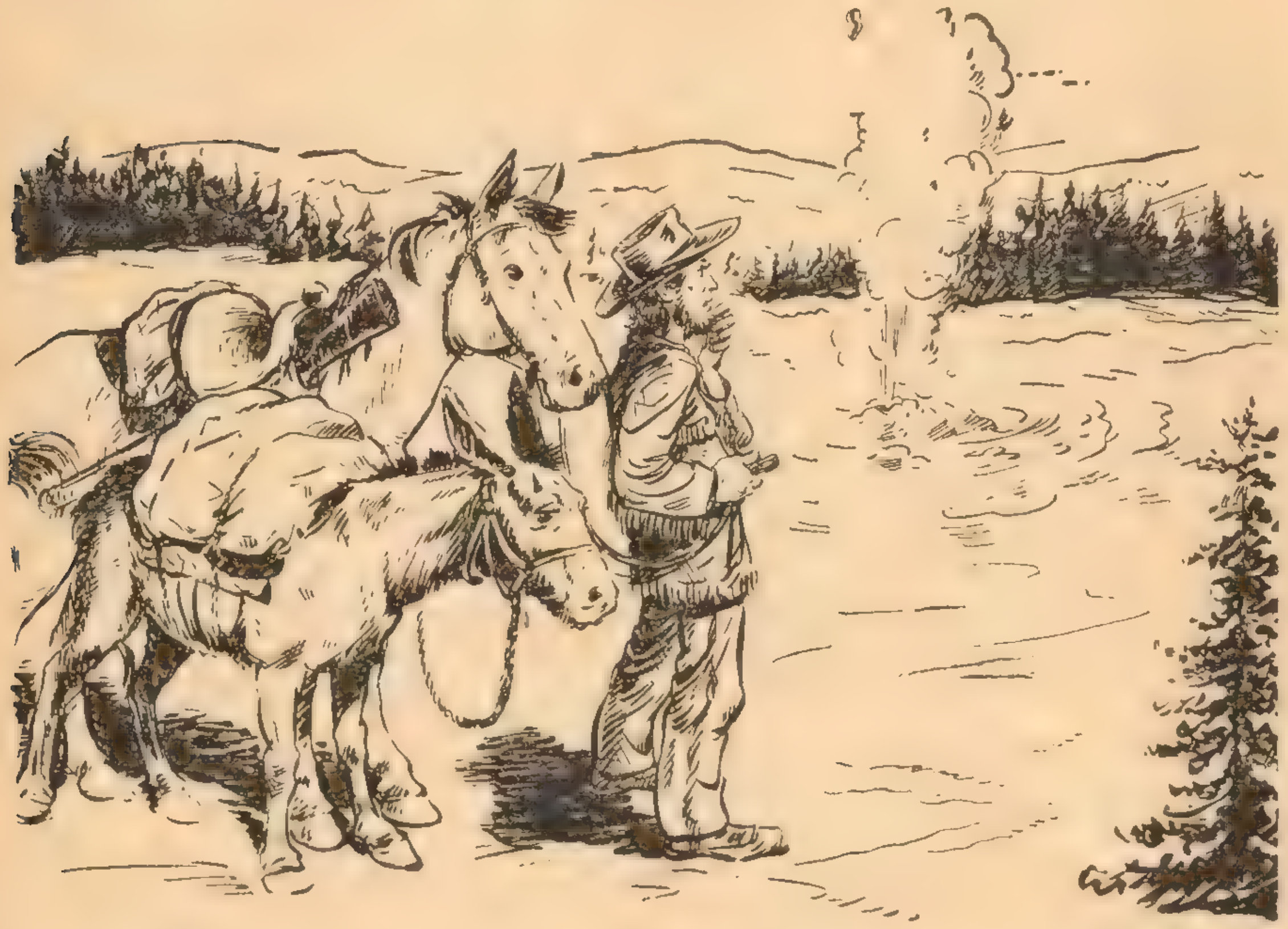
THE END

The Yarns of Old Gabe

Story by
CARL SMITH

Pictures by
ERVIN SCHWEIG

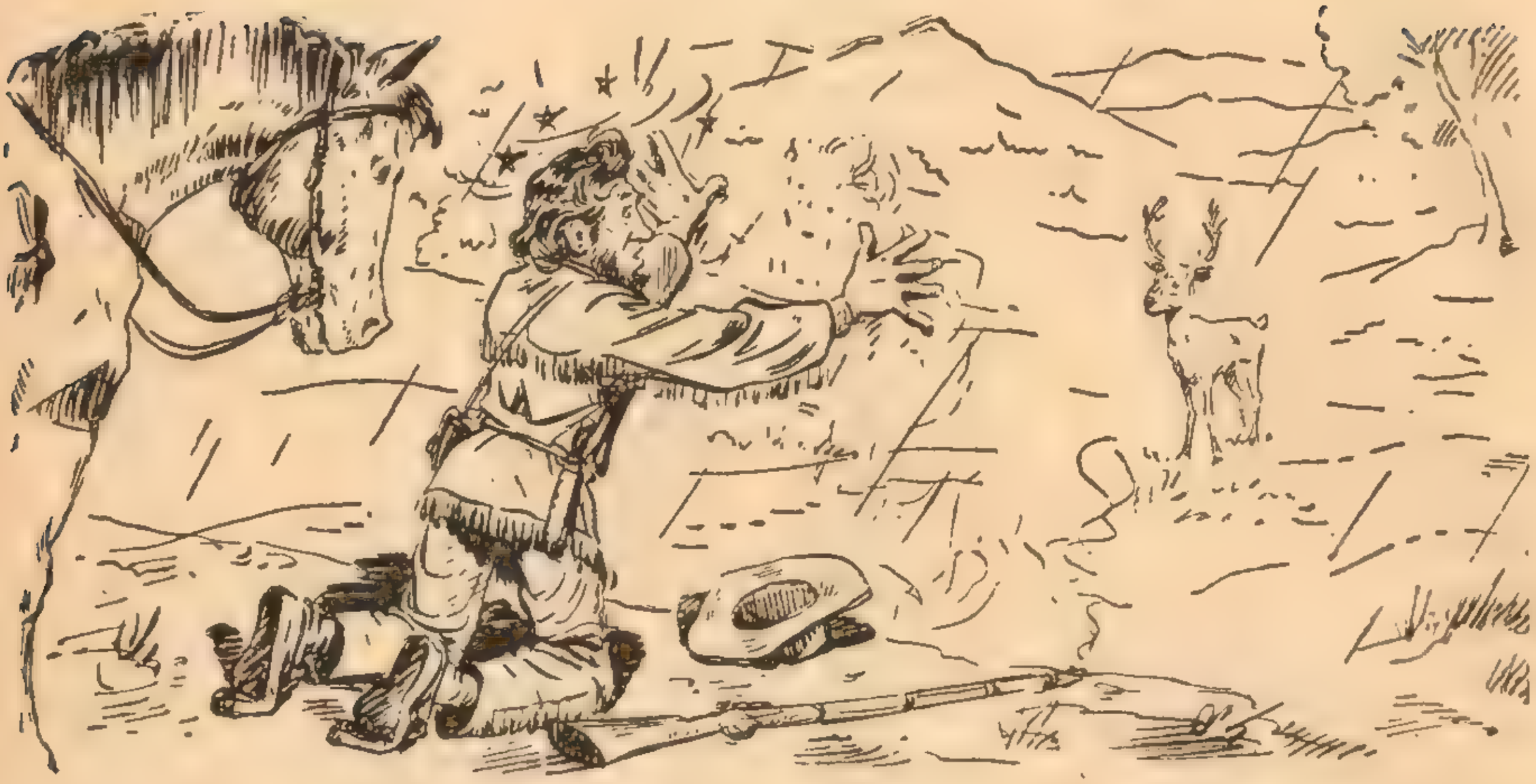
JIM BRIDGER, *mountain man—known affectionately as "Old Gabe" throughout the West—was perhaps the savviest of his breed. He was also one of the leading tall-tale spinners of his time, and his ability to manufacture "windies" often threatened to outshine many of his solid accomplishments. It all started innocently enough, when listeners scoffed at* ***his description of the Yellowstone region—***



Jim Bridger, perhaps the greatest of the old scouts, had explored more of the West than any other living man. It was Bridger who discovered Great Salt Lake and found South Pass and laid out the Oregon Trail. At first his stories of the natural wonders of the West were accepted—if reluctantly. But after his visit in 1830 to what is now Yellowstone Park, people shook their heads. "Poor old Jim—he's getting a little daft."

Jim's descriptions of columns of hot water rising from the ground, "thick as a man's body and high as the flagpole at Virginia City," were met with hoots of derision. So Jim began giving the public some real stories. From his discovery of Obsidian Cliff, the hill of volcanic glass in Yellowstone, he concocted one of the most outrageous yarns ever told.

"I come over a rise one day, up by the head of the Yellowstone," said Jim, "and thar's a buck deer croppin' grass, mebbe a hundred yards off. I sighted down on him with my rifle. *Spang!* Nothin' happened. So I tried ag'in, allowin' a leetle more for the wind. Well, sir, when I didn't tech thet buck with six shots, I started out to investigate."



"I'd walked mebbe fifty yards when somethin' hit me in the face and knocked me flat. Wa'n't a thing to see, but I felt around till I figgered out I'd walked right into the side of a glass mounting. Pure as crystal, it was, and yuh couldn't any more see it than yuh could see air. Thet buck was on t'other side of it, grazin' as peaceful as yuh like."

"And not only thet," Jim would solemnly assure his slack-jawed listeners, "but this here glass mounting acts like a magnifyin'-glass—thet buck I thought was mebbe a hundred yards off was more'n twenty-five miles away!" Jim also made a good yarn of the Petrified Forest, where, he asserted, petrified birds sat in the branches, singing petrified songs.

"Ever'thing fer miles around is petryfied," said Jim. "Acres an' acres of petryfied sagebresh, full o' petryfied jack rabbits an' rattlers, as natural as life. One day, with Injuns chasin' me, I come to the edge of a canyon a mile deep. My hoss wouldn't stop, and right over the edge we went. 'Yo're a goner now, Jim Bridger,' I says."

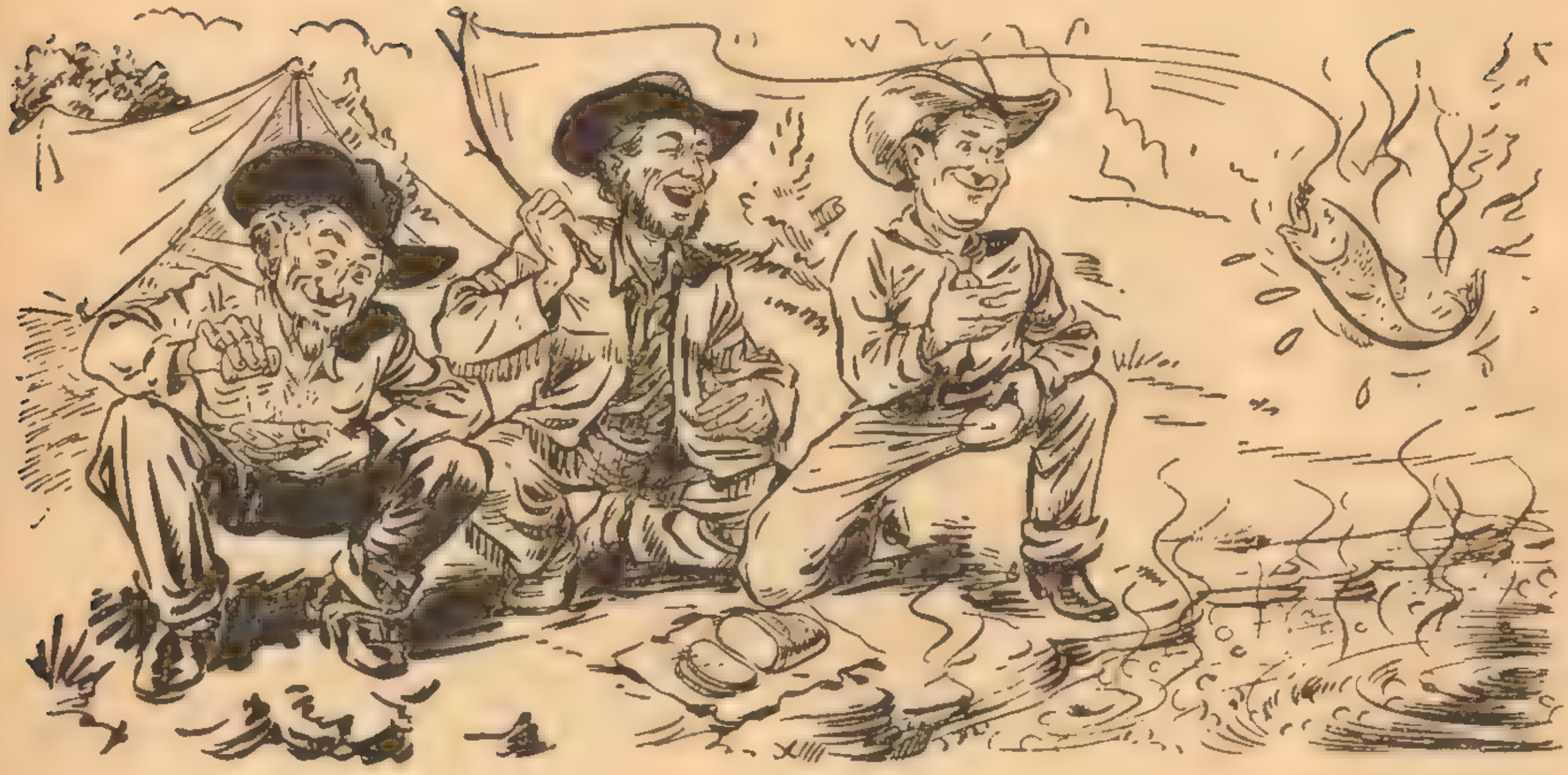
"But, d'ye know, thet hoss kept right on a-goin', runnin' like he was on solid ground. I was too busy gettin' away from them Injuns to think much about it then—but later I figgered it out. Like ever'thing else out thar, the air's petryfied, too." But for all his yarns, Bridger was a man of unmatched ability and many accomplishments.

Jim had a phenomenal memory and natural talents which enabled him, as army engineers admitted, to sit down with a buffalo hide and a piece of charcoal and produce a more accurate map than a professional could. Asked once how he determined height above sea level, Jim said, "Easy—jist bore a hole till yuh strike salt water, an' then measure the hole."

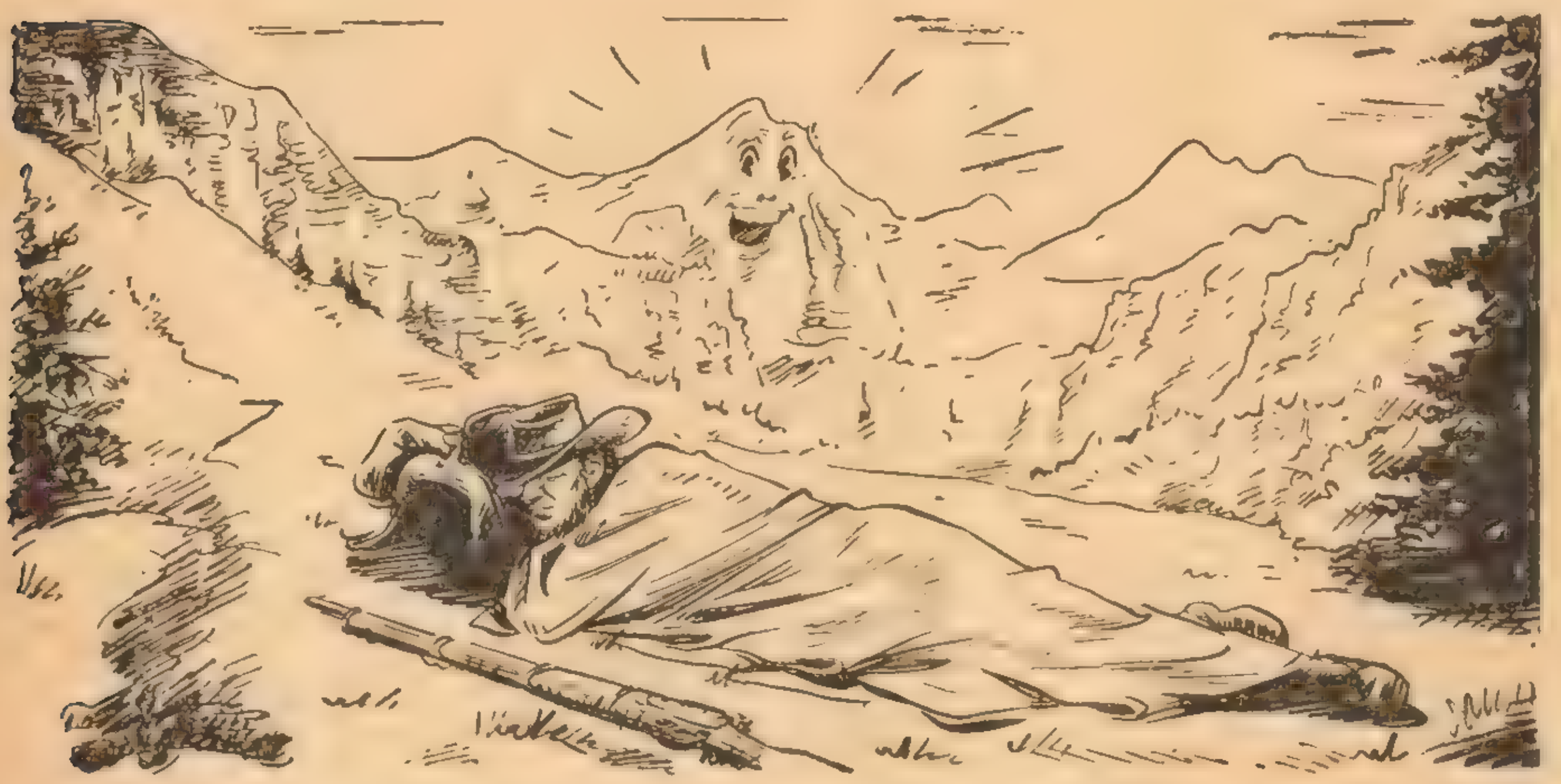
It was in 1824, while trapping the mountains for furs, that Bridger discovered Great Salt Lake, navigating Bear River in a skin "bull-boat" to its passage through the mountains near the great lake. He tasted the water and found it salty, and for a good while after that it was believed that the lake was an arm of the Pacific Ocean.

"Thet salt lake bein' the only water around," Jim explained, "the sun draws nothin' but salt water, so the rain and snow is salt, too. Now, jist like brine gits lots colder than ordinary water, thet salt snow is lots colder'n ordinary snow. One winter it snowed seventy days and seventy nights, and thousands of buffler was froze standin' in their tracks."

"After the spring thaw, thar stood all of them buffler, jist like they was when they froze—except they'd all been salt-cured. Thar was fifty, sixty thousand of 'em standin' thar on the plains, pickled on the hoof. Kept the whole Ute nation in salt meat fer years—they'd jist walk up and cut what they needed off one o' them pickled buffler."



Fire Hole River is well known to tourists now, but nobody then would believe Jim's story about the river that was ice-cold on top and hot on the bottom—from running across the rocks so fast, Jim said. Since he wasn't believed anyway, Jim put the cold water on the bottom, so that fish caught in it were cooked as you pulled them out through the hot water.



Jim also invented Echo Mountain, with such remarkable acoustics that it reproduced the smallest sounds at distances up to fifty miles. He had a favorite camp site picked out, to which it took an echo about seven hours to return. As he went to bed he would yell, "Get up, Jim!" and at sunrise the echo would awaken him with *Get up, Jim!*

A favorite yarn concerned the cross grizzly Jim met one spring just as it emerged from winter hibernation. "Only hed time to grab holt of his tail—and then I didn't dast let go." Here he would pause until someone asked, "What happened?" Then Jim would aver solemnly, "Why, I hed to hang on till next December, when thet b'ar turned in fer the winter ag'in."

The Bridger yarns became so famous that others began to make them up about Jim. He was discovered sitting forlornly in a Kansas City street one day, went one of them, and complaining: "I been settin' in this dang' canyon all day waitin' fer somebody to ask me to hev a drink, and none o' these people's opened their heads—never seen sich onsociable cusses!"

"Old Gabe," as his friends called Jim, lived to be nearly eighty. He had located and built Fort Bridger, been chief guide for the Union Pacific survey, and made himself invaluable to nearly every expedition that penetrated the West. Even after his eyesight began to fail, he could follow tracks as fast as his horse could run and find smoke on the horizon where field glasses couldn't for ordinary eyes. He lived to see editors apologizing, in print, for refusing to believe his stories of the West. When he died in 1881, the last of the great scouts was gone.

The Editors of Zane Grey's Western Magazine
Are Pleased to Announce the

ZANE GREY WESTERN AWARDS

To encourage and reward the writing of outstanding stories of the great American West, Zane Grey's Western Magazine will from time to time distinguish a Western story with a citation of merit to be known as the Zane Grey Western Award. It may be a story already published, in the pages of this magazine or elsewhere, or it may be a story which Zane Grey's Western Magazine will publish for the first time.

Any story of the Old West (except a story by Zane Grey) which does not exceed 10,000 words in length and which comes to the attention of the Editors will be eligible for a Zane Grey Western Award. All short stories published in Zane Grey's Western Magazine will automatically be considered for a Zane Grey Western Award. In considering stories for these Awards, the Editors of ZGWM will take into account authenticity of background, originality of plot, entertainment value, and quality of writing, and they will be particularly interested in finding stories which are more or less in the Zane Grey tradition.

Any story selected for a Zane Grey Western Award which is available for publication in Zane Grey's Western Magazine will be paid for at one and one-half times the magazine's regular rates. It is also the intention of the Editors to compile one or more collections of Zane Grey Western Award stories to be published in book form. At the time each Award is made, the Editors will offer to the author, in addition to the sum paid for ZGWM publishing rights, $250 for the exclusive right to include that story in any collection of Western stories for a period of five years from the date of the Award. In the case of stories exceeding 5000 words, an additional payment of five cents a word for wordage over 5000 will be offered for such exclusive right. All other rights, including motion-picture, radio, and dramatic rights, shall remain with the author.

Readers are invited to nominate their favorite Western short stories for consideration for Zane Grey Western Awards. Any person who nominates a story subsequently selected for a Zane Grey Western Award will receive a free copy of the first book of Zane Grey Western Award stories which includes that story. All correspondence regarding Zane Grey Western Awards should be addressed to The Editors, Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Racine, Wisconsin.

A Zane Grey Western Award Story

(For details of Award see page 101)

By JAMES STEVENS

JERKLINE

THROUGHOUT THE WEST *the fame of two men spread—King Bolt Jack and Blacksnake Baker—and in the rough fraternity of the hard, profane men who drove the ten-horse teams hitched to the great freight wagons these two men were giants. Through the years each went his own way, never meeting the other. But each one heard the tales of the other's prowess, and knew that a showdown had to come. This, the first of the Zane Grey Western Award stories (see Free-for-All), is the narrative of that showdown.*

FORTY men were breakfasting from vast platters of ham and eggs, mountainous stacks of hot cakes, and gallon pots of strong, steaming coffee on the rough tables of the Freighters' Rest Hotel. The reflectors of bracket lamps threw light over lean, weather-browned faces that bulged from too-generous mouthfuls of grub. Tough, hairy hands parted mustaches, lifted steaming cups, balanced halves of eggs on knives and thrust them out of sight, sliced off slabs of butter to

From HOMAR IN THE SAGEBRUSH, *copyright, 1928, by James Stevens.*

make a golden spread on plate-sized hot cakes, and held knives and forks upright, like swords at salute, when words were to be said or speech heard. There was, unusually, almost as much sound of talk as of eating at the Freighters' Rest breakfast table this morning.

"Yay, Blacksnake Baker, what's the matter of your brags this mornin'? Don't you still feel lucky when yer shed of redeye?"

"Why rub it into Blacksnake? King Bolt ain't sayin' nothin' neither!"

"Hell, he never does talk, onless he's got a king bolt in his hand."

"You'll let the cards talk for you, hey, King Bolt?"

"Reckon his hosses'll do some talkin', too. Damn, I'd give five hundred fer that jerkline leader of his'n."

"Ain't no purtier'n Blacksnake's."

"Yeah, but Blacksnake ain't never pulled Tight Bottom Hill yet. He don't have any idy of this yere doby road."

"Hell, roads is roads, and freightin' is freightin', wheresomever you go."

"I tell you a freighter needs to know Tight Bottom to pull it right. King Bolt's got a cinch."

"Well, pardner, I freighted with Blacksnake Baker up in the Seven Devils and I know his poker luck. He'll have King Bolt, outfit and all, afore they've crossed Shaniko Flat."

"Like hell! Blacksnake'll be lucky to land in Prineville with his drawers left, or even his socks!"

The two freighters concerned were silent under all this conversation. Blacksnake Baker parted his huge mustache, stroked his vast, flowing black beard, and said nothing. King Bolt Jack parted his long brown mustache, rubbed his smooth chin, drank his coffee, and said nothing. But both men looked knowing and serious. They were probably thinking pessimistically how hard it is to live up to a powerful reputation.

Both had been young freighters on the Santa Fe Trail, in the old days of the Major & Waddell wagon trains. Both had pioneered with the mule outfits on the Overland Trail, hauling supplies over the Nevada desert to Virginia City. But never had they been in the same train. They had worked all the other famous freighting-trails of the old West, but never together. The fame of both spread among the jerkline men; legends flowered about their supreme cunning and might in the freighter's arts—the selection and training of young horses for a jerkline string, the power to wind an outfit safely down a steep and treacherous mountain grade or to worm it through a stretch of doby mud, the ability to win at stud poker in the station games and to sample whisky from the barrels of whisky that made so large a part of every old Western freighting-cargo. Freighters built saloon arguments on the deeds of the two men. Gorgeous whoppers bloomed about them—

"Why, sir, up in the Bitter Roots, I saw Blacksnake Baker try out a swing hoss, a sorrel he was, and sech a bucker! First time Blacksnake harnessed him he bucked off harness, hide, and all! Yes, sir, and it was winter, and there he stood—Vernie was his name—there that sorrel Vernie stood in the winter wind, with no more hide on him than I got on my eye! There stood Blacksnake, bustin' blue cusswords over him for all he was worth, but Vernie knew what a heart his driver had. A smart hoss always does. So Vernie sidled up to Blacksnake, shiverin', the poor cretur, and gazin' with

the most appealin' look into Blacksnake's eyes. Well, sir, still cussin' a blue streak, Blacksnake got out his thread, needle, and wax and sewed the hoss's hide back on so slick you couldn't even tell where the stitches was! And Vernie was so grateful he turned into the best leader Blacksnake ever had. That's how Blacksnake Baker got along with hosses."

"That reminds me of the time King Bolt Jack made the first trip into a new Sawtooth minin'-camp. He come to a crick that looked small and harmless, so he plowed right on through. Dagnabbed if the water wasn't so powerful with alum that it was the shrinkin'est stuff you ever heerd of! The hoofs of all his hosses shrunk to the size of clothespin heads and the wagon wheels to the size of tomater can lids. I'd like to know what Blacksnake Baker would do in a fix like that! King Bolt Jack warn't buffaloed none. He went out and picked him up a half-dozen sackfuls of rattlesnakes, and set 'em to bitin' the hoofs and wheels till they was swelled up to their nacheral size agin. I seen his outfit right afterward, and I couldn't tell it had been through a thing. There was his team —Frontus and Backus was his wheelers' names, and Fiddle and Horn his leaders'—and their hoofs was nacheral as life. There now!"

Thus Blacksnake Baker and King Bolt Jack were made to be heroic rivals long before they actually met to battle for supremacy on The Dalles to Prineville road. For five years now King Bolt Jack had been the star of that trail. This spring Blacksnake Baker had rolled into The Dalles, driving a superb ten-up team and three wagons, new and shining. He had broken them in on the Condon trail, then secured a Prineville contract. At last he and King Bolt Jack were to make a trip in the same train.

"I'm shore feelin' lucky this trip!" Blacksnake Baker bawled that at King Bolt Jack when breakfast was done in the Freighters' Rest Hotel.

"Blacksnake Baker," said the star freighter of The Dalles to Prineville road, "I can drive my ten-up where you couldn't get down on yore hands and knees and drag a halter rope!"

Homeric legend faded before reality. A battle long hoped for was on. The two supreme heroes of the freight trails were to fight it out!

The morning dark was just beginning to dissolve when King Bolt Jack, helped by a feed-yard roustabout, led his ten harnessed horses from the mangers to the water trough of the Hippodrome feed yard. The rainy weather of the last few days had cleared the night before and the daybreaking smells were keen with frost. The two men were chewing tobacco heartily as they led the teams.

Every horse was a creature of individuality. Cal, a fat, elderly swinghorse, stubbed along, with his tail half-raised, as though he'd forgotten to put it back into place after once lifting it, with his head hanging in a thoughtful look at the ground. Both Turtle and Dove, two young bronco mare swingers, were switching their tails furiously and tossing their heads indignantly, not yet being reconciled to the morning feel of the collar. Blossom, the other swinger, was dragging on the halter chain, her chin stuck out, her eyes rolling, making a perfect picture of bronco meanness. Notion, tall and rangy partner of the wise and hefty Toler'ble on the wheel, had his head up

and was gazing far out and away, as though he knew there was a barrel of oats about a mile off; and so Notion shoved hard against the horses ahead of him, making one of them step on King Bolt Jack's heels. Then the freighter unlimbered his swearing apparatus for the first time that morning.

There was one of the outfit who walked beautifully from the manger to the trough. Her name was Banner, and, lads, she was the proudest and brightest creature that ever feasted your eyes! A full-chested, arch-necked, silk-coated iron-gray who waved a long black mane and tail and rolled at you the shiniest orbs! Beautiful was Banner, King Bolt Jack's jerkline leading mare, beautiful, proud, and wise and just wicked enough to keep Hondo, her woolly-coated brown mate, in his place with a curl of her pretty black muzzle and a flash of her white teeth.

At the trough the horses drank until they began to muzzle the water, then it was a jingle of harness and chains and yells of "Step over there, Blossom, you show-me bitch!" and "Back into that britchin', Cal, you jughead devil!" until the spans were hooked up. The wheelers were neck-yoked to the tongue of the first wagon. A thick iron rod swung below the tongue and a heavy chain ran from it to the bars of the pointers, the two swing teams and the leaders. Each span was under the restraint of check straps and jockey sticks. The jerklines ran from Banner's bit back to the saddle on Notion, the near wheeler. From that saddle King Bolt Jack drove his team, a blacksnake coiled over his shoulders, the jerkline and the rope that controlled the brakes of his three wagons in his hands.

As the outfit started, Blacksnake Baker brought his teams from the barn. "Feelin' luckier every minute!" he bawled through his whiskers.

The lordly swing of his long outfit through the feed-yard gate was King Bolt Jack's only reply.

By sunup his wagons were loaded with bacon, beans, flour, canned tomatoes, cases of sheep shears, bales of wool sacks, sides of harness, and saddle leather in the swing and trail wagons, and with barrels of whisky and kegs of beer in the lead one. He pulled away from the warehouse some time before Blacksnake Baker and the other freighters in this day's train were loaded.

With loaded wagons to heave on, the wheelers and pointers shotgunned, the swingers tried to jump the chain, the leaders bucked into their collars, jumped back like they were jerked, then bucked ahead again; but King Bolt Jack just jiggered his jerkline, talked hard but low to his horses; then as the iron tires of the front wheels began to screech on the gravel, he cracked the bud of his blacksnake over the swingers' heads, and all the spans lunged together, the wagons jerked and rattled, and the outfit rolled away.

There were wet spots on the wagon covers from yesterday's rain, and these steamed in the morning sunlight. There were puddles in the main street and the board sidewalks had a wet smell. The bright morning was at its clearest and freshest time, and a couple of early robins were enjoying it so that they chirped from the limbs of a cottonwood at the jingle of swinging bells. The bartenders, not having many customers at this hour, stood in front of their saloons and bawled jokes at the freighter as his outfit tramped and rolled by.

Brewery Hill loomed ahead. It was

so called because of the brewery at its foot, with a little beer saloon where it was the custom for freighters to pause and drink farewell to The Dalles in a glass of beer. King Bolt Jack honored the custom by observance, then started his outfit on the heavy drag up the long hill.

The horses, especially the broncs in the swing, were fractious on the start; but when Jack swung out of the saddle and leaped from team to team, giving them the bud of his blacksnake, they soon warmed their shoulders and marched into the plugging gait of the steady-pulling freight team. The bells made a slow jingle now. All the lead bars were even and the chain was tight, like a stretched rubber band. The trace chains and harness leather creaked, the horses' hoofs *ploomped* in the drying mud of the road, and the wagon wheels rolled in a dull rumble.

The top was reached with only two stops for blows. Up ahead the road twisted through the deep wrinkles of foothills. From here the Columbia Valley made a grand view. The river was a black streak in the shadow of the rock walls of Tumwater Gorge, but above it the foam of Celilo Falls made a bright white horseshoe in the mellow sunlight. An Upper River steamboat was waving its white wood smoke against the blue of the sky.

The tremendous hills beyond the Washington shore, bunched and piled in wrinkles and rolls, looked as old as time. King Bolt Jack gazed at them, and sighed. He had a feeling that he wanted to crawl into the lap of those old hills and rest his life peacefully away. But the other freighting outfits were stringing up the hill, with Blacksnake Baker at the lead. King Bolt Jack "yayed" his team. Banner and Hondo tightened the chain. Jack felt the strain of Notion's muscles under the saddle. His outfit rolled on.

At Five Mile Creek he stopped to water his horses and to feed them in nosebags. He had eaten his lunch and was preparing to sample the whisky in his lead wagon, when Blacksnake Baker drove up. King Bolt Jack didn't raise his eyes from his task. He hammered up the top hasp of a barrel, bored a hole through a stave with a small gimlet, and then siphoned a gallon jug full through a rye straw. The jug filled, he plugged the gimlet hole, and drove the hasp down over it. He was ready to travel again. As he threw his leg over the saddle seat he shot a glance at Blacksnake Baker.

His rival was engaged in sampling whisky and did not look up from his jug until he heard the sounds of Jack's departure. Then he turned his whiskers over his left shoulder, and bawled, "Feelin' luckier every minute!"

"You ain't got nothin' on me!" King Bolt Jack came back at him.

The first day's drive was easy going, the road meandering through the sagebrush and bunchgrass slopes of low, fat hills. The road had good bottom, there were no steep grades, and the horses were fresh. King Bolt Jack had plenty of leisure for thought. So he slouched in the saddle, streaked his team up with a few familiar swear words once in a while, tightened the brake rope on the pitches, and figured at length on the contest ahead of him.

Fifteen poker nights between here and Prineville, and Blacksnake Baker across the blanket. The seven-mile grade down the steep slopes of Tygh Ridge, and Blacksnake Baker always behind him. The long two-day drag from Sherar's Bridge, through the mud

of Shaniko Flat. Then Tight Bottom Hill, the toughest pull on any Western freighting-trail. Wherever one star freighter should stick a wagon he would have to bet on the pull with the other. Unless one of them was cleaned out before Tight Bottom was reached, they'd bet their outfits on the pull up that steep, treacherous, bottomless stretch of doby mire.

"I'm feelin' luckier every minute!"

The yell kept ringing in King Bolt's ears. Finally it brought on a presentiment. King Bolt Jack shivered in his saddle. The bright blue of the sky above turned dark for him. His soul sank into gloom, in spite of the whisky which he had sampled so liberally every half-hour. For he rarely had presentiments, and when he did have one it always presaged misfortune. Never in his life had he enjoyed a presentiment before an event that brought him glory or gold. Only evil events had cast their shadows before for him.

King Bolt Jack remembered every presentiment of his past. There had always been one before a Comanche attack on the old Santa Fe Trail. A powerful presentiment had oppressed him before the time he was alkalied on the Overland Trail, when he was freighting over the Nevada desert. When he was covered in a Blue Mountains landslide; when he stooped over with his back to a bronco mule in Missoula, Montana; when he was splicing a broken reach and a wagonbed of whisky dropped on him in the Coeur d'Alenes—every time a dark and oppressive presentiment had preceded the misfortune.

And he had a presentiment now. It certainly meant that Blacksnake Baker would beat him at poker, outpull him through Shaniko Flat, perhaps win his outfit on Tight Bottom Hill. Was he at last, after so much glory, to be driven off the freight trails? King Bolt Jack was afraid; for a while he thought, faint-heartedly, of turning back, selling his outfit in The Dalles, and going to Mexico; but his courage was not so easily quenched. He'd play the game through, to the last check. He squared his shoulders and lifted his head, looking out over the plumed and bellied arches above the hames of his swingers and leaders. He saw the iron-gray beauty of Banner, stepping high and proud under the jerkline. He heard the gay jingle of bells.

"Ain't never quit fer presentiments yet, have I, old hosses?" he bawled. "It's me with the cards, and you with the mud, and we'll go to hell a-fightin', hey, old-timers? So whoopee! and what the hell!"

After that he felt more pleasure in the rain-washed air, the sunshine in the yellow tufts of bunchgrass, and the warm blue of the sky. He sampled the whisky cheerily and grinned over the amazing names he thought up to call the presentiment.

But under it all he had a dismal sense of Blacksnake Baker crowding along behind him, on his trail, and feeling luckier every minute.

No poker game was started that night at Werner's, the first station out of The Dalles. Fifty freighters bound down from the upper country were in, and the hours between supper and sleep were spent by Baker, Jack, and the other up-bound freighters listening to tales of terrible roads. There was fair bottom in most of the road over Shaniko Flat, but with a few days of heavy rain the outfits would have to plow through sucking mud. And Tight Bot-

tom Hill, beyond Cross Hollows, was in the worst shape in its history. All freighters bound for Redmond, Bend, Silver Lake, Lakeview, Klamath Falls, or Prineville had better pray.

Both Blacksnake Baker and King Bolt Jack looked knowing and serious as they listened, but no words passed between them until bedtime. Then Blacksnake Baker raised his whiskers above his tarpaulin, and bawled across the fire at King Bolt Jack:

"How you feel about a little stud tomorrer night? Me, I'm feelin' luckier every minute!"

"That's right. Feel lucky while you still got the chance," King Bolt came back at him.

The news grapevined among the freighters bedded under their wagons. Tomorrow night hell would begin to pop.

It was another good drive the next day, for the going covered the best stretch of the entire road. That night at the Chicken Springs station, when supper was over and the horses were turned out on the bunchgrass, the stud-poker game was started. Five other freighters sat in with Baker and King Bolt Jack. After an hour of play they began to look at one another with wonder in their eyes. It was an astonishingly even run of cards. So far no player was winner or loser.

All the other freighters gathered about the game to watch and marvel. The deals and bets ran on through another hour, and still the cards held to their even run. A sense of mystery pervaded the game. The players were tense and quiet. The men playing "rubbers" hardly breathed while a hand was on. The fire was forgotten and died down. No sounds were heard except the nickers and sighs of the horses out in the bunchgrass, until lantern globes sputtered from sudden drops of rain.

The game broke up without a word. Not a player was over a few dimes winner or loser. The night was black with rain when King Bolt Jack rolled into his blankets. The gloom penetrated to his heart. He had held his own, but his presentiment was stronger than ever.

In the morning the freighters started down Tygh Ridge in a heavy drizzle. King Bolt Jack was still in the lead, with Blacksnake Baker following him. Seven miles of steep, winding road were ahead. A five-hundred-foot precipitous slope always to the left. A freighter never looked down that slope, for he never had time. Always he was worming his outfit into a wrinkle of the mountain or around a roll. The bends were sharp, and at every one the pointers had to cross the chain, to pull at an angle from the leaders and swingers and hold the wagons to the grade. It required the keenest driving and the most delicate braking to keep the three wagons of an outfit, with their ten tons of freight, rolling true on the steep, narrow road.

The road squirmed in and out of the folds of the mountainside like a tremendous, long worm. The wagons were like fat, white-backed bugs, the teams their long, wriggling necks, creeping on the tremendous worm's back. Above were the folds of the mountain, rolling up to round crests, with gray packs of raggedy clouds drooping in misty tatters until they almost touched the summits. The mountain's earth was rust-red in the rain. Here it had ridges of black-and-brown rock, and there it had a wide bulging slope like a fat woman's lap, yellow with old bunchgrass and white with new. At the mountain's foot was a plunging creek bordered with

leafing cottonwoods. Far away was the narrow floor of Tygh Valley, with the mountains around it looming dimly in the drizzle.

King Bolt Jack forgot his presentiment, the strangely even run of the cards the night before, and the perils and hardships of the days ahead, in the intense labor of steering his outfit down the grade. His body was drenched with sweat and his nerves were quivering like strummed banjo strings when he swung around the last bend and Banner and Hondo straightened the chain over a level track. He had never made a better descent of the great grade. It was easy going on to Sherar's Hotel and the toll bridge across the gorge of the Deschutes, easy going on to the station of Dead Dog. If the cards would only break for him there!

But the triumphant yell of Blacksnake Baker sounded behind him. Other outfits were in trouble on the grade, but Baker had never once ground a hub into a bank or dropped a wheel over a rim on the bends and turns. The shadow of the presentiment fell over King Bolt Jack again. The cards tonight in Dead Dog—the mud of Shaniko Flat—Blacksnake Baker yelling down the line:

"Feelin' luckier every minute, King Bolt Jack!"

That night at Dead Dog poker history was made, and the contest between Blacksnake Baker and King Bolt Jack began to assume the actual heroic proportions of the legend. The seven freighters played until three o'clock in the morning, yet not a one was more than one dollar winner or loser.

Blacksnake Baker had nothing to say about being lucky when the morning's start was made; his gaze was sober and hard, and his whiskers hung stiffly over his chest, showing that the jaws they covered were grimly set. King Bolt Jack's heart beat with some hope. He was holding his own.

The drive through sticky mud to Bakeoven station was made in a rain that cut like sleet, the wind drove it so hard. Wet and tired though they were, the seven gambling freighters renewed their game when supper was done. Till four o'clock in the morning they played, and still not a man could call himself a winner at the game.

The wonder of the players and the watchers increased. Nothing like this had ever been heard of before. Never had the cards persisted so in running even for seven men at stud. A marvelous chapter of poker history was being made. Before the game ended some of the players were turned sick from the even run. New decks were tried, but the change was useless. The cards are the cards, and they kept running the same.

"Luck's comin' to meet me on Shaniko Flat!" Blacksnake Baker had the courage to yell through his beard when the freighters were ready for the morning start. "I feel it in my bones!"

King Bolt Jack's only response was to swing into the saddle and "yay" his team.

It was the dreadfulest lug through Shaniko Flat he had ever known. The clouds rolled up in stacks and piles from the west and the wind threshed them into tatters and boiled them across the sky. The wind slapped the wagon covers, the freighters, and the horses with tremendous wet smacks; and at each blow it would rip and tear furiously into the outfits, seemingly bent on overturning wagons, knocking men out of their saddles and horses off

their hoofs; plastering all with bursts of rain, then resting and heaving, catching its breath before making another tremendous attack on wagons, horses, and men.

The horses, their necks bowed, bored ahead, and the wagons slopped on through the mud of the road. The horses mired at every step, the wagon wheels curled out ragged ribbons of mud at each side as they ground slowly on. The Flat rolled away like a rough prairie to the banks of heaving clouds. A mighty stretch of gray and white, sagebrush and bunchgrass, dismal to see on this stormy day. The outfits of King Bolt Jack and Blacksnake Baker never faltered once on the miserable drag. Seventeen others were stalled. The horses and men who came through were storm-beaten, wretchedly tired, when the Cross Hollows station was reached that night.

There was a roadhouse at Cross Hollows, with gambling-tables in the barroom, and with cribs to accommodate the bands of French women who traveled the Central Oregon country in the early days. After supper the freighters packed the barroom. A dozen rounds of drinks, then Blacksnake Baker sat at a table, a deck of cards in his hand.

"Shaniko Flat was a pipe for me and my team!" he bawled. "I rear to play stud till daylight! Who's settin' with me to break the even run of cards? Who wants to gamble with Blacksnake Baker for whisky, gold, hosses, freighting-outfits, or life? I rear to play! Come on, all you freighters who feel high and proud!"

King Bolt Jack stepped forward alone. The other gambling freighters knew the challenge was meant only for him. The stud-poker championship of The Dalles to Prineville road was to be settled here. When that was settled they would contest the pulling of Tight Bottom Hill, which was out of the Cross Hollows station. It was blocking freight traffic now, after the heavy rains.

"Neither one'll make that pull for a week," said a grizzled freighter. "I tried it yesterday. Put ten teams on one wagon and all they did was mire and snap chains. Tight Bottom'll lick 'em both."

King Bolt Jack heard that as he sat down at the green-covered table. He felt a shiver race down his spine. In the shadows back of Blacksnake Baker he seemed to see the shape of his presentiment, in the form of a grinning devil newly risen from hell. But he was going to finish the game, whatever the end might be.

"Shut up, and deal the cards," said King Bolt Jack.

Under the yellow glow from coal-oil lamps the game ran on. Freighters and stage passengers, cowboys and sheepherders from the ranches around gathered before midnight in the Cross Hollows Roadhouse to watch the famous game. The cards were running more amazingly even than ever, with only two hands in each play. Nearly half of the turnups ended in a tie. Whispers rose from the crowd:

"For Gawd's sake! You ever see the beat?"

"Never did. The ol' hell's in them cards, shore!"

The game ran on until daybreak, without a change in the even run of the cards. Both men grimly refused to stop for breakfast; they had other freighters feed and water their teams. Through the hours of morning and noon, on until the evening lamps were

lighted again the hole cards were dealt, the turnups made, the chips shoved out in bets; and still the cards kept their even run. Neither could plunges and bluffs change this amazing impartiality of fortune. Let Blacksnake Baker plunge and win, then King Bolt Jack would plunge and win. Let King Bolt Jack bluff and lose, then Baker would do the same.

The two great freighters had been at the table for twenty-four hours, but neither one would yield to weariness or hunger. They were both haggard and red-eyed, but they stuck to the table desperately determined to break the even run of the cards, until midnight, when they played that famous final hand.

King Bolt Jack's black presentiment had never been more oppressive than it was when he looked at his hole card from that last deal and saw that it was the ace of spades. But it only made him take a stronger grip on his courage. He bet ten dollars, Baker being the dealer. Baker called, and dealt. The king of spades turned up for King Bolt, and the king of clubs for Baker. A twenty-dollar bet and call. The next turnup brought the ten of spades and the ten of clubs. Thirty bet, and thirty called. Again Blacksnake Baker dealt two cards. King Bolt Jack bet five double eagles on the queen of spades and Blacksnake Baker called him on the queen of clubs—then Baker's brawny hand, shaking like the hand of a girl opening a love letter, flipped over to his rival the jack of spades!

A spade royal! King Bolt Jack felt his strained nerves relax; he wanted to whoop and yell, for the even run of the cards was surely broken now! His infernal presentiment had lied at last! For the even run of the cards had ended with his getting his first royal flush in thirty years of poker!

He shoved all of his chips and gold into the pot, without looking at Baker's turnup until after the bet was made. Then his heart seemed to melt and run down to his toes. For the turnup was the jack of clubs! Two royal flushes in a two-handed game of stud—it could *never* be! But the way the cards had been running—and there was the old gorilla shoving in all of his chips for a call—and when King Bolt's shaking fingers turned over his hole-card ace of spades, Blacksnake Baker showed a deathly white under his whiskers and tan, and turned up—the ace of clubs!

Two royal flushes from one deal in a two-handed stud-poker game!

The heads of both freighters thudded at once on the green-covered table; they sagged and tumbled as one man from their chairs to the barroom floor. There was an awed hush in the crowd as other freighters carried the two rivals to bed. Two royal flushes—at once—in a—well, there just simply was not a thing for a man to say about poker like that!

The cards had licked them both. On the second morning after the collapse of the game the two great freighters met again at the bar of the Cross Hollows Roadhouse. The freighters who were waiting for the mud to dry on Tight Bottom Hill crowded around them. The two rivals looked at each other with bleak eyes. Each one knew that the other was still poker-sick; the cards were not to be mentioned. But a grand play must be made.

"I'm hookin' up fer Tight Bottom this mornin'," said Blacksnake Baker.

"You ain't got nothin' on me," said King Bolt Jack.

"King Bolt, I bet all my gold I outpull you on that hill."

"You're took up right now, Blacksnake, if you bet your outfit. I bet mine, and the gold is on the side."

Blacksnake's whiskers stiffened. "And the man who loses agrees to go herdin' sheep?"

"Yep. Suits me."

"Yer on."

Again King Bolt Jack took the lead on the freight trail, through the wind and rain. He heard Blacksnake Baker's outfit tramping and rolling behind him. He knew that a hundred freighters had saddled horses and were riding out to see the great contest. But King Bolt Jack never turned in his saddle. He stared straight ahead, stared grimly and defiantly at the presentiment that took on a vague shape over the road ahead.

He was staring that presentiment down, swearing to himself that on the road he could not be licked. The cards were the cards, but these horses were his own. Banner and Hondo, Blossom and Cal, Turtle and Dove, Plaster and Blister, Toler'ble and Notion—no better ten-up had ever bellied down in the mud for a heaving pull on any freighting-trail! He would keep his faith in his horses; the presentiment lied!

When he had reached the foot of the hill King Bolt Jack was thinking of nothing but the pull. The grade, twisting above a deep gulch, was only an eighth of a mile in length, but it was the steepest one on the road, and it was dead-black with doby mud. A cloud, dark as the earth of the road, loomed ominously above the crest of the hill. The wind blew evenly, breaking slanting lines of rain in spatters against horses and wagons. The soaked branches of the sagebrush above the grade drooped mournfully under the wind. King Bolt Jack looked over his wheelers, pointers, and swingers. They were hanging their heads, miserable in the rain. The presentiment began to crowd over the freighter again. Then he looked at Banner.

The beautiful iron-gray had her neck arched, her ears were pricked ahead, she was staring at the grade, and King Bolt's heart pounded mightily as he realized that she was rearing for the pull. She knew that hill, his jerkline leading mare! She knew she could lick it, and she'd warm the other spans with her fighting fire! The presentiment faded again. King Bolt Jack swung from the saddle. After 'em now, old-timer! Victory or hell!

With a sledge from the jockey box he knocked the brake blocks loose and stowed them in a wagon. Then he uncoupled his swing wagon from the lead. He was back in the saddle again, without a look at Blacksnake Baker or the crowd of freighters in black slickers.

"Yay, Banner!" he called.

The jerkline leader leaned slowly into the collar. Hondo tightened the traces beside her. The swingers lunged, the pointers stepped out, and the wheelers stepped easily on, for the one wagon had been started without them. Then King Bolt Jack felt the strain of muscles under his legs. Before him the ears of the leaders, then their hames, rose slowly to a level with his eyes. They were on the steep grade.

The rumble of wheels and the solid tramp of hoofs were suddenly muffled. Doby was clinging to the iron of tires and shoes, padding them against sound. A horse would stumble easily now, slip from the treacherous black muck between the ruts, go down, and stall the outfit. Then it couldn't be started again

without help—without help from Blacksnake Baker, and a hundred freighters looking on.

Around the first, second, and third turns the ten-up did not falter in the track. Now the top of the grade was close. But there was a suckhole, a deadly patch of mire, to pull through before the pull could come to an end. And the horses were slowing down. King Bolt Jack could feel Notion breathing in great heaves. But no stop for a blow could be made on Tight Bottom Hill.

No stop for a blow, not with the jerkline leading mare buckling down, plowing so furiously through the doby mud toward the black storm cloud; Hondo slacked beside her; she snapped savagely at his neck, and he lunged on.

King Bolt Jack swung from the saddle. His blacksnake was uncoiled as his boots sank into the muck. The bud snapped in cracking shots that stung the flanks of swingers and pointers.

On the pull through the suckhole the freighter plunged ahead, leaped back, his blacksnake ever swinging and curling high and cracking low, his feet sinking to the ankles at every hard step through the muck, as the horses bellied down and crawled desperately on—on through the suckhole, on up the last fifty feet of harder road—and then the black cloud loomed far away, beyond a slope and a rolling sagebrush plain. The lead wagon was at the top of Tight Bottom Hill.

Banner, snorting and blowing, turned and looked triumphantly into the eyes of her driver. *We'll bring 'em all up, old-timer!* the look seemed to say.

His doubts all vanished. The presentiment was gone. He and his horses had licked the hill. The other two wagons had lighter loads. With caution and cunning, with any luck at all, they would pull all of them up the hill. And luck was on the road.

Tight Bottom Hill was licked by Banner and Hondo, Blossom and Cal, Turtle and Dove, Plaster and Blister, Tol-er'ble and Notion, and their great driver, King Bolt Jack. Licked when it was at its worst in mud and rain, licked when all the freighters of the trail said the hill could not be pulled.

King Bolt Jack made no fuss over his achievement. The bet was not yet won. The freighting might run as evenly as the cards had run, there might be another tie. So he simply blanketed his horses on the hilltop, slipped the straps of fat nosebags over their heads, got out his own lunch, ate calmly away, and said never a word as he waited for Blacksnake Baker to make the pull.

He had no presentiment of victory. He had no presentiment at all now, so he was pretty certain he was going to win, for he never had presentiments about good luck. He ate calmly on as Blacksnake Baker made the first two turns of the grade. He wanted the freighters ganged around his wagons to feel that he didn't give a damn whether Baker pulled the hill or not. But when he saw the leaders approaching the suckhole, when he saw that the jerkline mare's head was hanging an inch lower at every heavy step, when he saw whiskers wave in the wind as the driver left the saddle, when he heard the first crack of the blacksnake, then King Bolt Jack stood up on his wagon side, hung on to the brake staff, and held his breath.

A wheeler slipped, throwing his mate ahead. The blacksnake cut his side. The wheeler lunged furiously, retrieved himself, plowed on into the deep, sucking mire.

The jerkline leader faltered; Black-

snake Baker, his whip arm raised, jumped toward the head of his team. Here the track twisted around the center of the hole, a circle of black ooze. When Baker was even with it he flung back the bud of his blacksnake. As he snapped it ahead again, aimed for the flank of the jerkline leader, he slipped. The blacksnake whipped around his neck, in tight coils. The jerk overbalanced him; he seemed to dive for the black, oozing heart of the suckhole.

For an instant only his boots showed above the muck. Then they kicked wildly from sight, and the muck heaved. From it a black mass emerged. Blacksnake Baker pawed the mud from his eyes. His outfit was stalled.

King Bolt Jack was already pulling the nosebags from his horses' heads. But by the time he had reached the stalled team and wagon, Blacksnake Baker was already far down the hill, a black lonely figure, tramping on through the wind and rain to Cross Hollows, and a sheepherding job.

"Two thousand for his outfit," said one of the freighters in the admiring crowd.

"She's your'n," said King Bolt Jack. "I don't want no more'n Banner and them other beauties of mine."

WESTERN TRAILS

A Quiz

IF YOU'VE READ this month's magazine abridgment of "The Trail Driver," you should know something about trail driving. Not all of the trails of the Old West were used for cattle-driving, but all played an important part in the development of the West. The left-hand column below contains phrases that identify the trails listed in the right-hand column. Your job is to match them up; then turn to page 148 to check your answers. Seven or eight right makes you a good man to ride the trail with; a score of 9 puts you in Chisholm's class; and a perfect score makes you a Pathfinder, first class!

1. Through Powder River country to the Montana mines.
2. Along the Pecos and north to Cheyenne.
3. North out of Texas to Abilene.
4. From Dodge City north to Montana.
5. From Independence to the heart of old New Mexico.
6. The great highway of the emigrants, west and north from Independence.
7. This one hooked onto the Western Trail at Dodge.
8. Built in 1860, following an old Indian trail near Bitter Root Mt.
9. Up the eastern slopes of the Cascades and 2,000 feet down into Oregon.
10. The broad way from Oregon to California's gold fields.

_____ Goodnight-Loving Trail

_____ Applegate Road

_____ Mullan Road

_____ Santa Fe Trail

_____ Western Trail

_____ Texas Trail

_____ Chisholm Trail

_____ Bozeman Trail

_____ Oregon Trail

_____ Barlow Trail

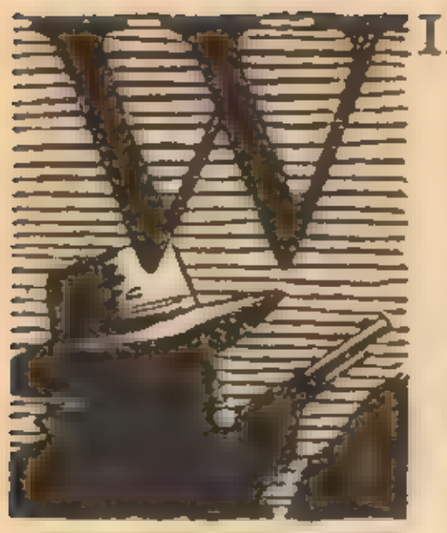
An Original ZGWM

Fact Feature

By

EDWIN L. SABIN

"WILD BILL"



ILD BILL" HICKOK, gunman, dead-shot, peace officer of the Plains West, was by true name James Butler Hickok. The "Bill" dates back to the Rock Creek Overland Stage station in southeastern Nebraska, where his long straight nose set over a somewhat pouty mouth got him the nickname "Duck-Bill." This was varied by "Dutch Bill." From that time, the opening of the '60's, Bill and a more respectful William replaced his given first name.

The appellation "Wild Bill" originated about the same time. While a stock tender at the station in 1861, he killed border-ruffian Dave McCanles and two other men. McCanles, a ready fighter and a rude joker who had given young Hickok his "Duck-Bill" handle, had come rampant with a demand for money due him from the stage company, or else—! The station keeper ran for the rear. McCanles tried to force entrance and, from cover, "Duck-Bill" shot him with a rifle. The other men leaped forward for action and he disposed of them with his revolver.

The plea of self-defense cleared Hickok in justice court. The story of the fracas thrived on retelling until it credited him with a fight in which, "running wild" with guns and knife, he had killed ten desperadoes and had received 11 bullet and 13 knife wounds!

There is no record that he ever publicly denied this yarn. He was no man to brag, but the reputation it gave him was an asset. One Colonel George W. Nichols, having met him in Springfield, Missouri, in 1865, repeated the story in a *Harper's Magazine* of 1867, implying that he was telling it in Wild Bill's own words.

In a duel in the Springfield square

Wild Bill, picturesque in buckskin, killed a man named Dave Tutt. The two men bore down upon each other. Tutt missed and from 50 paces Hickok shot him through the heart. As a general rule, Wild Bill's antagonists missed their shots and were promptly killed. His early reputation, backed up by his remarkable skill with one gun or two, had a great deal to do with this. An erect six feet two, built like an athlete, with movement as easy as a cat's, wide-set steely eyes and firm, relentless countenance, long blond hair and mustache, he presented a figure to test the nerves. He carried the air as well as the reputation of being invincible. Men felt that their only chance lay in one hurried first shot.

He was a recognized gunman, but not a killer badman. In his eight years as professional gunman he killed at least 35 men, scarcely the 85 credited to him by a loose tally. It was always open play, gun against gun. The only case of doubtful tactics was the McCanles affair, when he fired from cover, but then he was standing off an attack upon the station.

His work as peace officer at Hays City and Abilene, Kansas, in railroad-building, freighting, and cattle-drive days, brought him his chief prominence. His nerve there, when he often faced odds, stood him in good stead. Soldiers, toughs, and cowboys were out to get him. At Hays a sergeant and three privates surprised him sitting in a chair with hat over his eyes. The sergeant's ball from the saloon doorway scored his shoulder. Answering instantly with both guns, Hickok killed the squad.

Only once was his nerve shaken. That was when, in the Alamo saloon at Abilene, he out-faced a crowd of Texas cowboys, exchanged shots with their champion, "Big Phil" Coe, and whirling about at the sound of running feet in the dusky street, killed his own deputy, Jim McWilliams. This momentarily broke him. But he soon became his old, cold self and, patrolling the town, defied the vengeance of Coe's friends.

Wild Bill met his end in Deadwood camp in the Black Hills. His pace had tempered him. During his tour with a Wild West show the red-fire flares of the battle scenes injured his eyes, already weakened by long sessions at cards in smoke-dimmed lamplight. A blow from a tent pin had stiffened his right arm.

Kansas and Nebraska were growing tame. In 1875 he took to new territory. At Cheyenne his name was among those posted in a warning from the marshal to get out of town. With a flash of his old arrogance, Wild Bill ripped the placard down and told the marshal that no man could make him get out of town or turn in his guns. He gambled here for a time, and complaining that his eyes were poor, declared that he was through with gun-fighting.

In June of 1876 he arrived in Deadwood with "Colorado Charlie" Utter, plains scout. The curious camp saw a tall, square-shouldered, quiet man in gambler's black broadcloth and pleated white shirt, with the butts of a brace of six-shooters bulging his frock coat at the hips. The coat was a bit seamy, the shirt

front was frayed. Fortune had apparently neglected him. The guns were outmoded. They were finely mounted white-handled Colts presented to him by Vice-President Henry Wilson whom he had served in 1869 in a hunting expedition out of Hays City, but they were cap-and-ball.

A gang of Montana rufflers gave him the laugh — whereupon he backed six of them down with the sneered-at guns, stripped them of their own weapons, and saw his victims out the door of the saloon. He now felt entitled to change his cap-and-balls for modern metallic-cartridge weapons.

In a month he was dead. He had lived by the gun—Abilene had paid him $1000 a month for his gun rule there; he was to die by the gun, and he acknowledged that fact to Charlie Utter, and others. But he did not die in action. He was granted no opportunity to prove that although his sight blurred at 20 yards his hands were sure—that he was still a man not to be faced. The dread of his skill led to his downfall. He was shot from behind, one afternoon in August while he was at poker in Deadwood's Mann & Lewis saloon.

For perhaps the first time in his career he sat with his back exposed to the room and no mirror by which to watch. Jack McCall, a broken-nosed, cross-eyed miner, slipped through the rear door, and with hasty gun at powder-burn range shot him just above the left ear. McCall had been short $3.50 in poker stakes won from him by Wild Bill, and had resented the advice not to overbet his hand. The Montanans plied him with liquor and set him on to "calling" Wild Bill for the insult.

After the shot he made off in such panic that he mounted the wrong horse and the saddle turned under him. Calamity Jane, Wild Bill's great admirer, claimed that she held McCall up with a meat cleaver in Shoudy's butcher-shop. Actually he was hauled from hiding behind a side of beef by citizen Isaac Brown.

In a frontier trial held at a miners' mass meeting, McCall was acquitted of murder upon his statement (false) that Wild Bill had killed his brother. But when, in Laramie, Wyoming, he bragged of his exploit, he was arrested. Convicted in federal court at Yankton, South Dakota, he was hanged—in spite of his excuse that he had delivered his shot from behind because he "didn't want to commit suicide." He had, it turned out, only chosen rope instead of lead.

When the saloon was reopened after the stampede following the shot that killed him, Wild Bill was in a huddle upon the floor beside his chair. Fancy would say that his hands were instinctively clutched for his guns. The truth seems to be that the fingers were still in the position of holding the cards that he had been studying. He was only 39.

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

WHEN TELEGRAPH OPERATOR *Lew Pirtle's son, Lucius, Jr., comes back to Apache from four years in the East sporting something he calls a "bachelor's degree," his fellow townsmen figure he'll settle down and get re-civilized. What they haven't foreseen is the arrival of his Boston-beauty fiancee, Miss Spetunia Spoot, with her formidable parents, the M. Archibald Spoots III, of Beacon Street. This "Paintin' Pistoleer" yarn was written especially for ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.*

Go West, Young Woman!

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

IT WAS plumb redic'-lous, of course, trying to convert Apache from a two-bit Arizona cow town into a refined, fashionable center of culture. But when those pedigreed society bluebloods sashayed out from Boston, Mass., to size up the town, civic pride made Apache folks come rompin' out of the chutes with etty-quette an' eddication oozin' from their ears.

Venting Apache's brand just warn't in the cards, of course; but they run a perty good bluff, at that, considerin' they was betting deuces back-to-back agin a Bostonian royal flush.

It all started four years back when Lew Pirtle, who runs the Overland Telegraph office, decided to send his son Lucius Jr. off to a high-falutin' school in New York State, to file off his rough edges and cram his knothead full of sofistication and book-larnin' and how to hold a teacup without dislocatin' his little finger, and other essentials of gracious livin' which was a mite hard to come by in an uncurried frontier settlement like 'Pache.

Well, it kept Pirtle's nose to the grindstone, answering Lucius's distress signals for extry dinero to buy hisself overhalls he called "tuxedos," and perfoomy hair-lotion instead of the biled goose grease which the young bloods around here use, and books enough to pave hell a mile, and such fol-de-rol.

But anyhow, young Lucius finally dabs his loop on what he calls a "diploma," after spending four years and a mint of his dad's hard-earned cash. Lucius comes back to Arizona Territory all duded up fitten to kill, in spats and tight pants and a vest and a hard derby hat, and takes on a job as clerk in the Stockman's Bank, of which Jim Groot is the ramrod.

Lucius was a plumb likeable cuss before he corralled this new Oxford accent, though, so the town calculates he'll settle down in the harness eventual and get hisself re-civilized.

But it seems that Lucius Pirtle, Jr., had made quite a splash back at this here school where he got a "bachelor's degree" slapped on his hide. During his last summer vacation, Lucius had posed for a picture which our local artist feller, Justin Other Smith, was painting for a magazine cover. Smith, who is better known hereabouts as the Paintin' Pistoleer on account of him being the champeen pistol shot west of the Pecos, had painted Lucius as an Injun fighter wrasslin' with Geronimo on the brink of a cliff.

It seems this here magazine showed up at Croton-Oil-on-Hudson, the college Lucius was attending, and them Easterners got the idea that Lucius was a two-gun rough rider from the wild and woolly West, who could shoot Buffler Bill into the shade, ride anything with hair on, and sleep of nights on a soogan stuffed with the skulps of Injuns he'd sent to the happy huntin' grounds as soon as he outgrowed

his cradle. Instead of admittin' to his college pards that he had just posed for Justin O.'s painting, Lucius modestly admits that he's got a big repitation out West as a redskin hunter.

This makes Lucius the hero of the campus, an' a filly name of Spetunia, from a Boston society fambly, she cuts Lucius out of the herd while he was soaking up refinement at Croton-Oil-on-Hudson, and got herself engaged to marry up with Lucius as soon as he got settled in his bank job out in Arizona. Which is proof right there that his "bachelor" degree wasn't worth the sheepskin it was printed on.

Well, Lucius stalls off sending word to his Boston sweetheart to rattle her hocks out West for the weddin'. After a few months, Spetunia's old man, who is a Boston financial magnet name of Marmaduke Archibald Spoot III, he sends a telegram to Lucius saying him and his wife are heading West by train, bringing Spetunia with 'em, to prove that Lucius is a tinhorn four-flusher instead of a hero.

Of course Lucius's dad, being the Overland Telegraph operator, he lets this news leak out pronto. Most folks in 'Pache figger that Lucius can sizzle in his own juice, if'n he had tried to pass hisself off as the bull of the herd back home.

Seeing as how the Paintin' Pistoleer's magazine cover had been the cause of Lucius getting in his jam back east, young Pirtle decides it's up to Smith to help unravel things. Justin O. has a studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, and that's where Lucius braces him.

"I got as much trouble as a stump-tail bull in fly time," Lucius begins doleful-like, without a trace of his Oxford accent showing through. "Here this beautiful young social butterfly, Spetunia Spoot, is wingin' her way out West, and she expects to find me the leadin' citizen of Apache, instead of bein' the tinhorn sport an' cheap incomepooper her folks say I am. Her pa and ma like to swallered their cuds when Spetunia busted the news to 'em that we aimed to get hitched in double harness after graduation."

Justin O. knows his usin' Lucius as a model for his painting is the thing that the kid blames his difficulties on, so he feels he's sort of been dealt a hand in this game.

"Just what," Smith asks in that soft Alabama drawl of his'n, "did you tell Miss Spoot about yourself and your home town?"

Well, it takes considerable scratchin' to dig the truth out of young Pirtle, but he finally owns up that he'd made out to Spetunia's folks that he had single-handed cleaned the Injuns out of this corner of the Territory, and that he was the bravest hombre this side of the Rocky Mountings, bar none.

"Mister Spoot tells her I'm a yeller-livered braggart, ascairt of my own shadder," Lucius mourns. "The reason for that opinion bein' that when I first visited 'em in Boston, last Christmas, they tried to git me on one of them new-fangled electric tram cars which run along Beacon Street. Nacheral, seein' a vehicle movin' without hosses or an en-gine hitched in front, I shied in the traces an' skun up a tree in Boston Common."

Justin O. tugs his lower lip, frowning plumb serious. "I can well savvy your trepidation," he allows. "Any other reason why Spoot figgers you ain't man enough for his daughter?"

Lucius scratches his noggin with a hoss-shoe nail, pondering. "We-ell," he

admits sheepish, "when I got to their house in Boston—which hogan is twict as big as the Wells-Fargo livery barn—Spetunia showed me into what I figgered was my bedroom. It was kind of smallish, but nacheral I was too refined to say anythin'—that would be what they call in Latin a *fox's puss*.

"But when I got into this room, Spetunia pushes a button an' the hull thing riz clean to the roof! It tooken a bottle o' smellin'-salts to rally me around. Later I found out this corntraption was what they called a 'elevator,' but I told 'em that out West we used ladders to git into attics with, an' that's what I would use in Boston, thank you just the same."

The Paintin' Pistoleer has a coughing spell at that.

"An' here's a telegram," Lucius groans, producing same, "which I got today. It says the Marmaduke Archibald Spoots III are on their way out to size up my home range. They're expectin' me to be the town hero, an' they're likewise expectin' to find Apache is a mee-tropolis as straightlaced as Boston an' twict as refined. Ain't I got my nose knee-deep in trouble?"

Well, Smith makes certain of two things: that Lucius has told Spetunia the real truth about himself not bein' an Injun fighter, and also that he loves this gal something fierce, which Smith allows is what counts in the long run.

"You leave this to me, Lucius," Justin O. says. "When the Spoots arrive, I guarantee they'll believe that Apache, Arizona, is the cultural capital of the West, and what's more, that you're the boss wrangler on this spread."

Well, Smith starts out by rounding up his cronies in what passes for the civic forum, namely Curly Bill Grane's barroom at the Bloated Goat Saloon. There's Sol Fishman, who owns the O. K. Mercantile, and Jim Groot the banker, and Sheriff Rimfire Cudd, and Dyspepsia Dan of the Feedbag Cafe, and a few other rannihans.

"What we got to do is spruce up a little," Justin Other Smith explains. "You galoots got to get haircuts and maybe take baths, and launder yore overhalls for the first time in years, and otherwise impress these visitin' Bostonians that you're elite upper-crust gentlemen of breeding. Most of all, boys, we got to convince this Marmaduke Archibald Spoot III that his prospective son-in-law is the bravest hombre who ever burned a pistol cap."

Well, Sol Fishman grumbles that Lucius Pirtle, Jr., ain't worth it. But him and the others changed their minds when Smith p'ints out that Apache's muni-sipple prestige is at stake.

"We don't want them Boston puritans to give our community a hosslaugh," Smith augers. "What's more, we need fewer bachelors in this burg nohow, if Apache is goin' to grow up with the country. From what Lucius says, this girl Spetunia is cut the right way of the leather. All she needs is a chance to shake the dust of Boston off'n her bustle, to be right civilized."

Well, anyway, the Bloated Goat bunch gits to work. Sheriff Rimfire Cudd takes a *pasear* over to the Cheery-cow Injun reservation, and has a pow-wow with the kingpin, Chief Ache-in-the-Back.

After he has bribed the chief with chawin'-tobacco and a quart of Curly Bill Grane's redeye whisky (which last is strickly illegal, and could have cost the sheriff his star), the old Injun agrees that when the app'inted time

comes, him and forty-fifty Cheery-cow bucks, in warpaint an' feather bonnets, will raid Apache and pertend like they want to count coup on the Boston pale-faces.

These Injuns will be driv off single-handed, of course, by none other than the town hero, Lucius Pirtle, Jr., who will stand ace-high with Marmaduke Archibald Spoot III when he rescues Spetunia from them tomahawk scalp-hunters.

Meanwhile, Lucius being the dutiful son he is, he takes his mother into his confidence. Missus Pirtle is the new president of the Apache Ladies' Knittin' & Peach Preserves Society, and she is proud as a mare with a two-headed colt over her boy fixing to marry up with a Beacon Street debutanty.

Missus Pirtle palavers with Samanthie Coddlewort and Hernia Groot, and they decide it's their civic duty to make the town look more aristocratic. They begin their campaign by having Justin Other Smith paint up a batch of signs.

Cowtail Alley, which leads from the railroad station to the stock pens, becomes "Park Avenue Boulevard." The sign on the town's one and only hotel, which for forty-odd year has read COWBOY'S COMFORT ROOMING HOUSE, GUARANTEED BUGLESS, is changed to "The Waldorf-Plaza Arms."

Hernia Groot rousts Sol Fishman out of the two front rooms, where he has batched for twenty year, and the womenfolks spend two days cleaning out that boar's nest. They label the door as "The Royal Bridle Sweet," which same the Spoots III will occupy when they show up in 'Pache.

The Bloated Goat Saloon has a canvas tarp slung acrost its false front to hide its vulgar sign, and on this tarp is lettered APACHE LITERARY & BOOK-LOVERS' LEAGUE, although this makes Curly Bill Grane so stark raving mad he gets drunk and threatens to perforate the Spoots with his double-barrel greener, on sight.

Sol Fishman voluntarily rechristens his O. K. Mercantile into the "Exclusive Paris Emporium & Fashion Salon." He even goes so far as to rig up a window display of the latest red-flannel drawers and high-buttoned women's shoes he's got in stock, although it's plumb doubtful if the Bostonians will do much window-shopping while they're out West, the glass being so fly-speckled and cobwebby.

The main detail, of course, is convincing these Spoots III that their would-be son-in-law is the real McCoy as a bold Lochinvar out of the West, afraid of nothing that breathes. Sheriff Cudd's arrangement with Chief Ache-in-the-Back's warriors may turn the trick, but when Lucius hears about that scheme, he's dubious.

"You see, I've already bragged to Spetunia's folks that I've made Apache too hot for a redskin to git within a hundred mile of the place," he explains. "I told them the Arizona red men call me 'Thunderbolt Bad Medicine,' and that their squaws warn their papooses as soon as they're borned to steer shy of my stampin'-grounds, at the risk of losin' their topknots."

Well, it's too late to call off the Cheery-cow raid, for fear of offending old Ache-in-the-Back, him being a touchy old buzzard. But Justin Other Smith promises that after the powder smoke settles, he'll assure these pilgrims from the Hub o' the Universe that the Injun raiders were Comanches from Texas, who have come acrost country to see if they was skookum enough to nail Lucius's hide to a fence

—to the tribe's everlastin' sorrow.

The whole scheme has leaked out by now, what with the womenfolks being let in on it. As a result of this, the best idea of all is hatched up by a hombre who is a newcomer to Apache, the night hostler at the Wells-Fargo barn, name of "Swede" O'Flannagan.

Swede O'Flannagan is an ornery-looking galoot with notches on his gun butts, who has had Sheriff Rimfire Cudd scairt sleepless ever since he come to town a month ago. Rimfire thinks mebbe this O'Flannagan is a wanted owlhooter, hidin' out from the law. Swede drinks like a blotter, but just the same, he comes up with this prime idea for backing Spetunia's folks into Lucius's stall.

"Young Pirtle works at the bank, as I savvy this layout," O'Flannagan tells the boys who are roundsiding at the Bloated Goat. "Why not arrange for Pirtle to kill a masked bandick durin' a holdup while the Spoots are lookin' on? The robber, of course, will be Justin O. Smith, your champeen gun slinger."

Well, the boys put that idea on the back of the stove to simmer awhile, and Lucius, who is swigging buttermilk along with the Paintin' Pistoleer, he allows the scheme has merits, at that.

"Sheriff Rimfire Cudd will be in the bank at the time of this phoney holdup," Swede O'Flannagan warms to his subjeck. "Every spalpeen in the bank —includin' Lucius an' Cudd an' the Paintin' Pistoleer—will have blank shells in their shootin'-irons, savvy?

"Spetunia will see a rootin', tootin' Western gun fight, with Smith pertendin' to salivate the sheriff. When Rimfire falls dead, the gal will realize the town ain't got a lawman to defend it, and she'll realize likewise that the outlaw's li'ble to make off with *her*. An' that's where young Lucius Pirtle steps into the picture. He kills the masked bandick, usin' a shotgun with blank loads in it. Faith an' begorra, men, I can hear the weddin' bells a-janglin' in the Baptist church right this minute!"

Well, everybody gits enthusiastic over the idea, including the Paintin' Pistoleer. Next morning they pull off a rehearsal in the bank, with Justin O. climbin' in through a winder and shooting Rimfire Cudd, finally getting his needin's from the dashing hero, Lucius Pirtle, Jr.

Swede O'Flannagan, dressed in gunnysack skirts to play the part of the bride-to-be, he embarrasses young Pirtle considerable when he kisses him an' begs him to corral a preacher pronto, but the rehearsal is pronounced a big success. Needless to say, Lucius figgers the wedding is a cinch, forty ways from the jack.

The night before the Spoots III are to arrive in 'Pache, a little hitch develops. Chief Ache-in-the-Back sends a runner over from the Cheery-cow reservation to say that his braves don't want to pull off no humiliatin' retreat unlessen they get paid for it, five bucks a head. So the town took up a collection, with Justin O. making up a $45 deficit out of his own pocket, and sends the dinero over to the Injun camp—enough to hire 40 warriors, including the chief, who has upped his ante to $15 and a bottle of forty-rod.

Well, that's how things stack up when the Rainbow Flyer stops on flag the next morning, the first time that's happened since the Skunk Gulch trestle caught fire. The whole town is out to greet the Marmaduke Archibald Spoots III, the men wearing new gal-

luses, and the ladies of the Knittin' & Peach Preserves Society drawed up like a twenty-mule team alongside the baggage-room platform.

Lucius Pirtle, Jr., wearing this git-up he calls a tuxedo—which looks like the coroner's buryin'-clothes—he's waiting at the coach steps when his sweetheart leaps into his arms. Spetunia's as perty as a little red wagon, about eighteen, with eyes as shiny as Rimfire Cudd's nose. She's sweet enough to eat raw, for a fact.

Next to show up is Spetunia's mother, and the contrast is something fierce. The "III" in Missus Spoot's name must be the tally count on her three chins. Her nose is stuck up so high she'd have drowned pronto if'n Arizona had had a halfway rainy climate. She's peering over the crowd through a pair of eyeglasses she's got rigged up on a kind of a stick, which is maybe why she trips coming down the steps and sprawls headlong, bowling over the conductor and busting a plank in the station platform.

She bounces to her feet as dignified as ever, though. She's wearin' a bustle the size of a mail sack at seed-catalog time, and totes a little postage-stamp parasol. Mebbe she's blue-blooded, but there's a passle of squaws over to the Injun reservation who could have spotted Missus Spoot III a hundred pounds of tallow and still beat her comin' an' goin' in a free-for-all beauty contest.

Last off the train is Marmaduke Archibald in person. He's a mousy little hombre, bald as a turkey egg. Mebbe he's a big business magnet out in Boston, but in Arizona he's a ganted little maverick who'd be cut out of any herd as a cull for the glue works.

Marmaduke's wearing a Boston Watch & Ward button, and under his arm he's got a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*, which he aims to censor as being indecent. When he steps off the train he appears at first glance to be sawed off at the knees; but this turns out to be an optional illusion, him having stepped into the hole in the platform which his wife had caved in a minute before. He's stuck there tighter'n a cork in the bottom of a glue bottle.

Well, while the sheriff and Justin O. Smith are busy prying Mr. Spoot out of this hole, Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge reels off an official address of welcome, pertending he's the city mayor.

The Spoots are looking down their noses at the crowd—the old folks, that is—but they pert up some when they are loaded into a yellow buckboard which has been donated by the livery stable, and they ride in state for the fifty feet from the railroad depot to the shack which is now called the Waldorf-Plaza Arms.

Missus Spoot III has a little trouble negotiating the rickety stairs up to the Royal Bridle Sweet, but the manager, Crowfoot Hoskins, he explains that the reg'lar elevator had caught the eye of His Royal Highness the Prince o' Wales, who spent his two-weeks' summer vacation in 'Pache this year, and the Prince bought the elevator to take back to Buckin'ham Palace, and they ain't got delivery on a new one yet.

The main event on the program that evening is a formal banquet at Dyspepsia Dan's Feedbag Cafe, now wearing the name of "Ye Olde Gourmet's Inn, Henri Delmonico, Matre d' Chef." This shindig ain't open to the public, only to the Spoots and Pirtles.

Dan is all bibbed and tuckered out like a French sport in a black suit he borried from the undertaker, and along with the grub he dishes up a lot of

elegant talk about horse's doves, cover charges, table of oats, and such-like, which is over the heads of everybody present except the Groots III, who savvy it easy.

While the Spoots and Pirtles are having their snack of bait, Sheriff Rimfire Cudd is out in the mesquites riding herd on Chief Ache-in-the-Back and his Injun warriors, who are due to pull off their big raid as soon as the visitors polish off their chow.

Things git perty suspenseful when the banquet finally busts up, with Lucius Pirtle leading Spetunia out into the street. Missus Spoot is picking her false teeth with a fancy gold quill, with Marmaduke Archibald trotting along behind like a dog on a leash, and they size up Apache's Great White Way.

Missus Spoot sees that Apache's womenfolks are dressed in the latest style, too. All the Knittin' & Peach Preserves Society members are out promenading, and they've all got their spectacles rigged up on sticks, just like Missus Spoot. "Lung-nets," Hernia Groot says is the name for them.

Well, out in the chaparral back of the Busted Flush Dance Hall, Sheriff Rimfire Cudd gives the high-sign to the Injuns. Out of the brush they come, a-hossback. There's only six-seven of them, though, instead of the forty which the town has rented. Seems the Injuns figgered that as long as they'd been paid off already, there was no use riskin' pneumony by shedding their blankets, so most of the bucks were squattin' along the street to watch the fun.

Anyhow, Chief Ache-in-the-Back and six warriors come riding down the main street hell-for-leather, shivering without their blankets, and doing more coughing than war-whooping. The Apache ladies scream "Run for your lives! We'll all be scalped alive!" and skedaddle like a flock of hens when a buzzard hawk shows up.

Everybody runs, that is, except the Spoot family and Lucius Pirtle, Jr., who find themselves surrounded in front of the Longhorn Saddle Shop by these here redskins.

Them bucks are a decrepit-looking lot. They got a few chicken feathers stuck in their hair, and are smeared up with axle grease and corn starch as a kiss-poor imitation of warpaint.

The chief's horse shies and bucks Ache-in-the-Back tail over tincup onto the ground at Missus Spoot's feet, knocking the wind out of him, but he picks hisself up finally and waves an ax with a broke handle which he's passing off for a tommyhawk.

"Injuns want-um p-p-paleface scalps!" the chief stammers the speech he's memorized, acting as nervous as a kid recitin' poetry at a church sociable. "Big chief ketch-up squaw for his wigwam." Then he ad-libs quick-like, "I mean this young squaw, not the fat one. Ugh! Heap good! Wah-hooo!"

Well, the other bucks slide off'n their crowbait nags, shivering in the cold, their scrawny ribs all over duck-bumps. Chief Ache-in-the-Back, having delivered his blood-curdling announcement, gets an acute case o' stage fright and just stands there scratching the flea bites on his pot-belly.

Young Lucius is frantic, trying to signal the chief to attack him. Ache-in-the-Back finally gits wise, and makes off to draw his scalping-knife, which same he carries under the waistband of the cut-off levis he's wearing. The blade slashes his belt in two, and from there on the chief is got his hands full holding his pants up.

One of the Injuns squatting over on the saddle-shop porch puts in his two cents' worth: "Build-um heap big fire, burn palefaces at stake! Wah-hoooo!" Right this minute, them teeth-chatterin' Cheery-cow bucks look like they needed a warm fire, at that.

Well, Lucius draws in a big breath, shoves Spetunia safely behind him, and gets set to make his hero play. Before he can move, though, Missus Marmaduke Archibald Spoot III waddles past him and bops Chief Ache-in-the-Back acrost the noggin with her parasol, bowling him off'n his feet. That redskin really bit the dust, as Shakespeare said onct.

"Begone, you filthy hinterland barbarians!" Missus Spoot III screeches. "What do you mean, appearing in public with nothing on but your underwear? Scat, the whole vulgar lot of you!"

Well, Ache-in-the-Back picks himself up, almost losing his pants before he makes his saddle. The other braves scramble to fork their nags, with Missus Spoot a jabbing their rumps with her parasol, never once lowering her lung-net eyeglasses.

Thirty seconds later there ain't nothin' left of that bloodthirsty band of Injuns but a few chicken feathers floatin' in the dusty air. Them Cheery-cows lit out for their reservation and didn't come out of hidin' till the fall beef issue at the agency.

Lucius shows up at the Bloated Goat a while after that, looking plumb miserable. He says that the Injun attack was what he calls a "fiasco," and that Marmaduke Archibald is over at the hotel going after Spetunia hammer and tongues for wanting to marry a no-good coward who would let his mother-in-law drive off a gang of mother-nekkid hoodlums. Seems them Boston aristocracks ain't even caught on that Chief Ache-in-the-Back's outfit was supposed to be redskins, mebbe because they was blue with cold. The Spoots III figger they was fugitives from a bathhouse, judgin' from the towels wropped around their middles, or something.

"Furthermore," Lucius moans, "they're callin' Apache a plebeian, decadent, jerkwater, bucolic, low-caste hog-waller of which there ain't no whicher on the map of the U. S. A., and be damned if they'll stand for their daughter comin' to live in such a run-down camp."

Swede O'Flannagan, he treats Lucius to his first shot of forty-rod, and tells the kid to pert up, that the big "bank robbery" tomorrow will fix things up proper. The town goes to sleep on that, plumb humiliated but hopin' for the best.

Turns out, next morning, that Lucius don't have to lure the Spoots over to the Stockman's Bank on no pretext or other. All three of the Spoots are perched on the bank steps when Jim Groot shows up at nine o'clock to open the place. Marmaduke says he wants to git a traveler's check cashed, so's he can buy a return ticket for Boston, Mass. Seems there ain't another train due through 'Pache until next Thursday week, so the Spoots aim to take a stage over to Tucson and ketch a train there, takin' Spetunia with 'em.

Well, Jim Groot stalls them off while Lucius hustles over to the jailhouse and wakes up the sheriff, telling him that the fake bank robbery has got to be staged earlier than they'd planned. Things moved mighty rapid behind the scenes then, with the Paintin' Pistoleer fixin' up his robber's mask and makin'

sure his gun was loaded with blanks, and getting over to the woodshed alongside the bank where he will wait for Lucius to signal to start the robbery.

The sheriff, he lights a shuck over to the bank, his guns loaded with blank ca'tridges, and strolls in casual-like. He finds Spetunia sobbin' her eyes out, with Marmaduke and the old woman fumin' because Jim Groot is taking so long to cash their check.

Well, Lucius opens the alley window, to signal Justin Other Smith. Lucius feels a heap relieved when he sees his masked bandick step out of the woodshed, brandishin' his six-guns an' winkin' at Lucius. It's now or never, Lucius knows, so far as winning his bride is concerned. He figgers mebbe even Spetunia is beginning to peg him for a iggorant deceiver.

Well, Jim Groot and young Pirtle are back in the vault getting out their dinero, when all of a sudden a two-gun man wearin' a sombrero an' batwing chaps and with his face covered with a dirty red bandanna comes straddlin' in through the alley window.

"Reach for the roof!" he hollers. "This is a stick-up!"

The Spoots really get their corks to bobbin' when they look into the bores of them two Colt .45's. Missus Spoot drops her lung-net glasses an' busts 'em, she's in such a hurry to raise her arms. Just then Rimfire Cudd slides off the corner stove where he's been warming his britches, and heads toward the bad man with his six-guns barkin' an' smokin'.

The bandick swings his Colts toward Rimfire Cudd and yanks triggers. Rimfire chokes out, "Yuh got me, podnuh!"; claws his chest; an' pitches to the floor like a coat slidin' off a hook. This is too much for Marmaduke, who keels over in a dead faint.

The sheriff's feelin' hotter than a four-bit pistol about now, because he distinctly heard a couple of *bullets* drill the stove behind him! Something has slipped up—maybe because Justin O. was called away from his studio so sudden—because it's plumb obvious that the Paintin' Pistoleer's guns ain't loaded with blanks.

Over in the vault, Jim Groot and Lucius see the bullet holes in the stove, and Lucius ain't acting very heroic when the masked bandick backs them into the vault and tosses them a gunnysack, tellin' 'em to fill it up pronto with legally tender dinero.

"*Pssst!*" whispers Jim Groot, shaking like a cat spitting peach seeds. "You got real loads in them hoglegs, Smith!"

"Close-hobble yore trap!" snarls the bandick, and belts Jim Groot acrost the noggin, layin' him out cold.

Well, Lucius goes green aroundst the gills and likes to claws his fingernails off filling the bandick's sack with greenbacks and specie. Spetunia is watchin' him through the window of the teller's cage, scairt pea-green, figgering her lover is going to get his chips cashed in any second now.

The bandick shoulders his sack of loot and backs out of the vault, fires a couple shots to ventilate the ceilin', and bellers: "I've just kilt the sheriff of this burg, an' I'll do the same to ary galoot who tries to foller me, savvy?"

With which he crawls out of the window and vamoses out acrost the desert on a hoss he had stashed in the 'squites, taking along might nigh onto $10,000 of the bank's liquid assets.

After a good safe wait, Sheriff Rimfire Cudd screws open one eye. Then he hauls hisself to his feet and sprints out the front door. This makes Missus

Spoot III bat her eyelashes, plumb puzzled. Rimfire's a mighty lively corpse, even for a healthy climate like she's heard Arizona Territory has got.

Anyway, out in the bank's woodshed, Rimfire Cudd finds the Paintin' Pistoleer. He's laid out with a lump on his noggin, having been knocked out colder'n a pawnbroker's heart.

Cudd pours some whisky down Smith's gullet, which rallies him pronto. By this time Curly Bill and Sol Fishman and the other boys in on the hoax have gathered around, wondering what went wrong.

"Swede O'Flannagan come into the woodshed just as I was getting my mask on," says the Paintin' Pistoleer, who's really on the peck. "This whole idear of a fake holdup was O'Flannagan's scheme to double-cross us into puttin' blanks in our guns, so's he could pull off a real robbery. We're a bunch of jugheaded fools, and I'm the biggest fool in the herd."

Well, Lucius's matrimonial chances are blowed higher than the tail feathers of a soarin' eagle now, but that ain't no-ways important. While Sheriff Cudd is trying to round up a posse to chase this O'Flannagan the Paintin' Pistoleer bolts a kack on Skeeter, his palomino, and streaks out of town on his own private man hunt.

With him rides Lucius Pirtle, straddlin' the fastest bronc he could rent at the livery stable. Lucius says he cain't bear to look Spetunia in the eye ever agin, and that he don't aim to ever go back to Apache. Claims he's going to rip his college diploma out of its frame an'—well, he's figgered up a practical way to utilize that document, he says.

As soon as the Paintin' Pistoleer cuts Swede O'Flannagan's tracks—which are headed toward the Mex'can border—he gives his palomino the spurs and leaves Lucius in a cloud of dust, Skeeter being the fastest hoss in Stirrup County.

Lucius keeps joggin' along, feeling flatter than a week-old flapjack. He figgers Mexico is as good a place as any for him.

Along about noon, he sees a big dust boiling up out of the Sacatone foothills, an' perty soon, he sees the Paintin' Pistoleer ridin' back toward town. Smith's trailin' a man on foot, with a lass' rope around his neck. His prisoner turns out to be Swede O'Flannagan, who's totin' his bag of bank loot. O'Flannagan ain't tryin' to auger about this arrangement, neither, for he's had a chance to find out that Smith's famous .32 on a .45 frame ain't loaded with no blanks. Not this trip.

"Swede got set afoot when his bronc busted a laig in a gopher hole," Justin O. tells Lucius. "No difference, I'd have trailed the walloper clean to Chihuahua if'n I'd had to."

The Paintin' Pistoleer grabs O'Flannagan's gunnysack and tosses it to Lucius Pirtle.

"You burn the trail back to 'Pache, son," he says. "You got time to make it before Spetunia pulls out on that four-o'clock stage for Tucson, I reckon. And turn this dinero back to Jim Groot's bank, so's it can start accumulatin' interest agin."

Well, Lucius lines out for 'Pache like a turpentined terrier. It's a tedjus ride for Smith, slowed down like he is by Swede O'Flannagan's having to hoof it, so it's after dark when he shows up in Apache. He turns the bank robber over to Sheriff Rimfire Cudd, who claps O'Flannagan in jail pronto. O'Flannagan is glad to get there, actually, his

hoofs being wore down plumb to the frawgs.

Feelin' the need for some nourishment, like say a glass of buttermilk, the Paintin' Pistoleer sashays over to the Bloated Goat Saloon. He notices that the APACHE LITERARY & BOOK-LOVERS' LEAGUE sign has been tore down, along with all the other phony pedigree trappings around town. That tells him for shore that them snobby Spoots have high-tailed it back to Boston, Mass.

Shoulderin' through the batwings, Smith finds the barroom jammed to the rafters. Marmaduke Archibald Spoot III, the Boston financial magnet, is treating the house to Blue Bagpipe Scotch. He's got one arm around Lew Pirtle's neck, just like they was social equals, and he's plastered to the eyeballs.

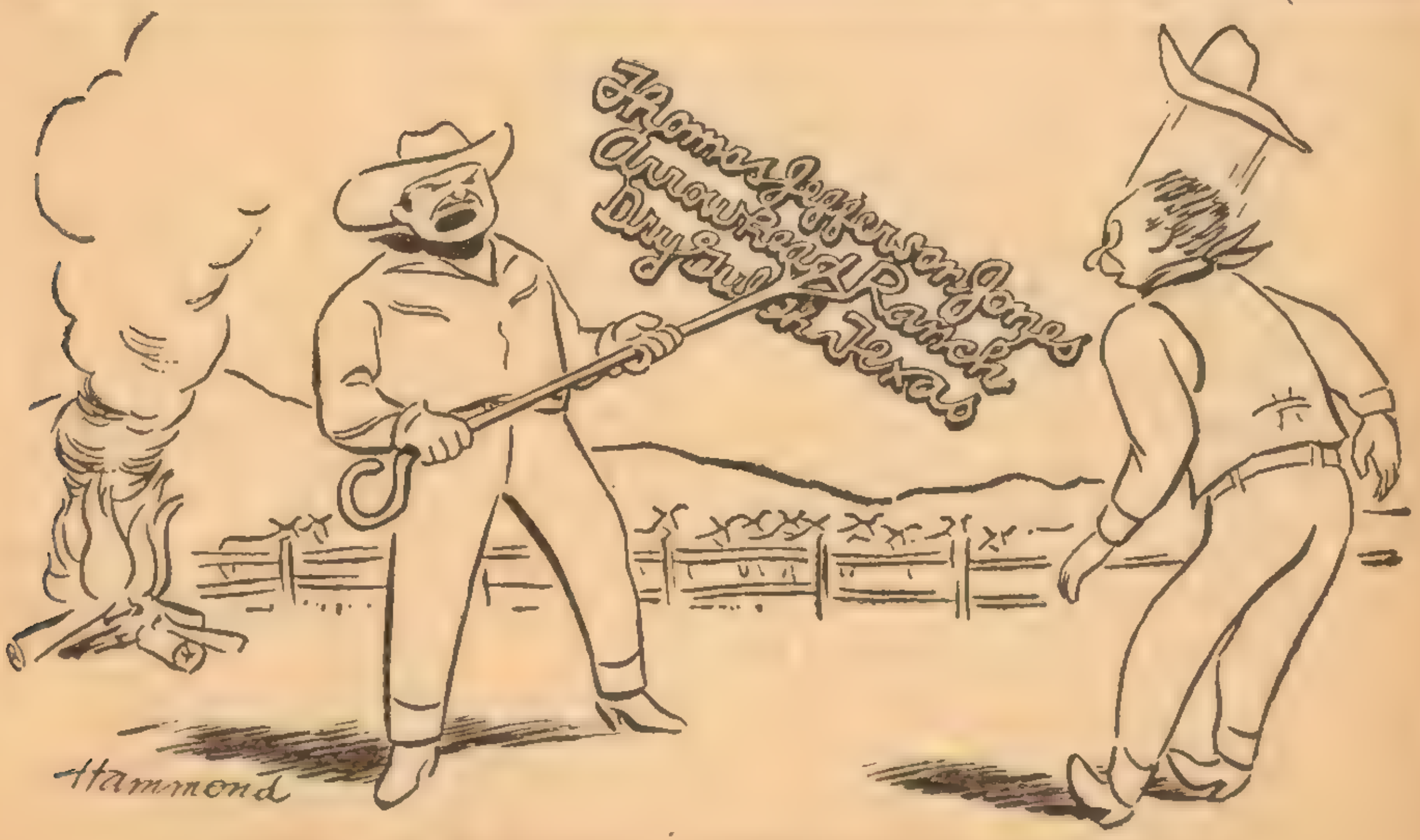
It's quiet enough to hear a bumblebee belch for a minute, and then Spoot III greets young Smith:

"Come join our bacchanal, young man! We're celebrating the marriage of my daughter, who is now en route to Tucson on her honeymoon with the hero who went out into the desert alone and slew that bank robber, bringing back the miscreant's ill-gotten boodle as proof of his deed. Spetunia's a lucky young woman."

Smith bats his eyes a time or two, not thinking Marmaduke Archibald could have possibly got himself that tipsy. But Mr. Spoot lost his holt on Lew Pirtle's neck just then, and fell flat on his face on the barroom floor. Cocking one eye up at the Paintin' Pistoleer, he spits out a mouthful of sawdust and hiccups:

"What I personally am celebrating, stranger, is that my good spouse has retreated to the purlieus of Beacon Street, leaving me free to draw the first happy breath of my hen-pecked career!"

With which Spoot passes out cold.



"Well, I got durn tired of rustlers changin' my brand!"

Corazón Means Heart

By S. OMAR BARKER

HAVING ACHIEVED a station of substance and respect in the town of Corazon, symbolized by his election to the county sheriffship, Dike McLaren abandons it—that and a yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl—to ride away to Mexico, not knowing when, if ever, he will return. There is, of course, a story in the reason for his going—and the author tells it dramatically, compellingly, in the following pages. This story was written especially for ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.

WITHIN, two days after Dike McLaren was elected sheriff of Corazon County, he resigned. Out of the little New Mexico cowtown where he had in five short years become a man of substance and respect, he rode in the gray of dawn, with few farewells and almost no explanation. He had roused blunt-nosed old Judge Hewett out of bed to hand him the resignation.

"I got a message from Mexico, Tom," he said briefly. "Might be gone five, ten years. I've got to resign."

Judge Tom Hewett, who had sponsored Dike McLaren's election, didn't ask him his reasons. But, standing in the dark doorway in his nightshirt, he did try to rally him to stay.

"This is a lawless county, Dike," he said. "I figured you and me together could clean it up."

"So did I, Tom. I'm mighty sorry."

"I had a notion you had your heart set on being sheriff, Dike," went on the older man, "or I would never have

backed you."

"You notioned right." McLaren spoke soberly, the shape of his lank frame showing dimly against the coming daylight. "I'd rather be sheriff of Corazon than anything I know of."

"Lafe Langford's wild bunch will be pleased to hear of your resignation," observed Judge Hewett. "A good many folks are going to call you a quitter."

There was a whiplike sharpness in the old judge's tone, but McLaren gave no outward sign that he felt it.

"I've got my reasons," he said.

Then was the time for Judge Hewett to have asked him what they were, but it was not the way of western men in those times to ask other men's private thoughts. The judge sighed, scratching the rotundity of belly under his nightshirt.

"I had a notion," he ventured with some hesitation, "that once you got elected sheriff, you might plan to marry and settle here for good."

McLaren's lips drew tight in the darkness, but he did not answer.

"Does Jeannie know you're going?" It was the first outright question, and it got an outright answer.

"No." To the judge's keen old ears there was a hint of soul-misery well hidden in the tone. "It wouldn't do no good to tell her."

"Sure," said Judge Hewett, then after a pause: "I suppose Jeannie will marry somebody else in time—maybe Lafe Langford."

Dike McLaren made an odd noise in the region of his Adam's apple. For the first time he spoke defensively: "I couldn't ask a woman to share my goin', Tom. Not the way it is. Maybe I'll be back. Maybe not. I've got a job to do, an' that's all there is to it. You've got my resignation."

"As the Court I will accept it," said Hewett shortly. "As your friend, I will say that I consider you a damn fool." He put out his hand. "Good luck and plenty cartridges, cowboy!"

"Luck!" said Dike, and strode out to his horse.

Half-wakened by the stony sound of hoofbeats down the street, Jean Campbell wondered drowsily why they seemed to pause a little passing her house; then she turned over and went back to sleep.

Against the dull dawn-reddening of the sky, Dike McLaren reined up a moment on Lobo Ridge, half a mile out, and looked back.

Lights were beginning to flicker yellowly in the houses of early risers. One of them indicated that old Tod Campbell, as usual, was up before his womenfolk. The sour-spoken owner of Corazon's wagon yard would have made him a damn good town deputy—maybe a good father-in-law.

Corazon— In Spanish the word meant "heart." For Dike McLaren, leaving it behind, it was a town well named.

Exactly why he had not revealed the reason for his departure to Judge Hewett—or even to Jeannie Campbell—was something that Dike McLaren could not well have explained, even to himself. For one thing, he had never been a man to air his mind unduly. He could not recall, for instance, that he had ever told anyone in Corazon anything about where he had come from. For another, maybe it was in the back of his mind that knowledge of any troubles of his, past or present, might lay a needless burden on the minds of his friends.

So long, Judge— Good-by, Jeannie— Adios, Corazon! Suerte y cartuchos!

The West of those days ripened men early. Dike McLaren was twenty-six when he surrendered his coveted sheriffhood to ride south and far, without benefit of border passport, to the adobe-hutted Mexican village of Solanita. He had been something less than eighteen, a raw kid from the Missouri farmlands, when he rode a "chicken-ketcher" saddle on an old roan work horse into Diamond City, Texas, looking for a chance to become a cowboy.

Diamond City was a store, a saloon, a blacksmith shop, and half a dozen shacks, all owned by the Diamond X outfit, whose headquarters sprawled at its outskirts. The whole spread was owned and ramrodded by a hard-cured specimen of human rawhide named Bill Diamond.

Bill Diamond looked the boy over, ordered his storekeeper, Crackerbox Kimball, to sell him an outfit on credit, including a Winchester and a six-shooter, and signed him on to roustabout and wrangle horses.

"Pay for the stuff out of your wages," Bill Diamond told him. "Thirty a month to start." He examined both guns carefully and handed them to young Dike McLaren himself. His flinty gray eyes seemed expressionless and his tone of voice flat as a board: "Better learn to shoot these things, kid—an' soon," he advised.

"Yes sir," said Dike, not bothering to mention the squirrels he had been knocking out of Ozark treetops ever since he was big enough to lift his father's old single-shot. Nor did he ask why he should learn to shoot.

A week later he was setting posts for a new fence across Buffalo Draw when a little man with neat, salty-gray chin whiskers rode up on a big bay horse.

"My young Christian friend," he said, in a tone mild and almost apologetic, "I wouldn't set no more posts here if I was you."

Thinking there must be some kind of a joke in the making, Dike grinned. "All right, I'll bite," he said. "Why not?"

"Because I don't aim to permit no Diamond X fence on my land," said the elderly little man. "My name is Charley Rand."

"Mine's Dike McLaren," said Dike, with something of the belligerence of youth. "An' as long as the man that pays my wages wants posts set here I aim to set 'em!"

Charley Rand took time to fill and light his pipe. "I bought this land legal," he said finally. "You can tell your boss I'll fight to hold it." Without waiting for Dike's answer, he turned and rode away.

Bill Diamond's laugh when Dike reported the matter to him had the flinty sound of hard, dry rawhide scraped with a knife.

"Old Charley Rand's a damn fool," he said. "You set posts where I tell you to, kid—an' keep your gun handy."

Dike said neither yea nor nay to that, and asked no more questions. But he was a raw kid, new to the country, and it made him uneasy.

The next morning he found the posts he had set pulled up, the holes filled, and old Charley Rand sitting quietly on a pile of them with a Winchester carbine across his lap. Dike felt a sudden flare of anger as he dismounted before him.

"Mr. Rand," he said, "I think you're lookin' for a fight!"

Rand shook his head. "I never drawed bead on a man in my life," he said.

"I was sent out here to set posts, Mr. Rand!"

"By yourself, I notice," the little man said dryly. "If you was found dead here, a Diamond X jury might find it easy to hang Charley Rand for murder."

"I don't aim to be found dead here nor no place else, Mr. Rand. But I come out here to set fence posts, an' I aim to set 'em."

"If it was me that was found dead," went on the little man in his slow, dry way, "Bill Diamond could lay it on a young greenhorn—like as not claim he'd never hired him to set posts in the first place. Either way, Diamond City likely wouldn't have no more competition from Randville as a town site, and Bill Diamond would live to be the richest man in west Texas. I notice you're wearin' a bran'-new pistol. You much of a shot with it?"

Dike McLaren flushed. "That," he said, in his own brand of Ozark drawl, "is none of your business, Mr. Rand."

"Well, I figgered I might ask. I try to be a fair man, McLaren. I wish you'd think about it before you make up your mind to set any more posts on my land —I sure 'nough do."

Dike never did know for sure whether it was the Winchester across Charley Rand's knees or the old man's odd-spoken earnestness that made him climb on his horse and ride back to the Diamond X headquarters. He found Bill Diamond supervising the readying of a roundup wagon.

"Mr. Diamond," he asked bluntly, "did you send me out to set posts—or to shoot a man?"

Bill Diamond gave him a hard look, then laughed—and the laugh was hard, too. "Let the ol' buzzard bluff you out, huh?"

"Is it sure 'nough his land?" asked Dike.

"You ask too many questions, kid," growled the Diamond X boss. "Land in these parts belongs to whoever gits there first an' can hold it. But we'll 'tend to that fencin' later. Right now Smoky needs a hoss wrangler on this roundup. Better git your roll in the wagon."

His part in "that fence business" hadn't set very well with Dike, and he had been half a notion to offer to quit; but the chance to go out with the wagon changed his mind.

The young greenhorn from Missouri was not long in finding out that the Diamond X crew was a bunch of pretty hard cases—tough-talking, tough-acting hombres, as ready to shoot a man as a rabbit, and doubly ready to brand any and all strays they could lay their ropes on.

Bill Diamond didn't stay with the wagon himself. He left a taciturn waddy called Smoky Sikes as wagon boss, and taking a hard-eyed, gun-fondling jasper called Al Weeks with him, returned to Diamond City. Weeks, Dike learned later, was not only one of Bill Diamond's hired men on horseback, but also a deputy sheriff of huge Dobbs County, in which Bill Diamond seemed to be the political boss.

"Bill's scared ol' Charley Rand's new town site will get ahead of Diamond City if him an' ol' Al ain't there to hamper him," commented one of the hands. "But hell, Rand's a fool to expect anybody to take their trade where there ain't even no saloon!"

In that he seemed to have been mistaken. A stray man, arriving at the wagon from over on the Salado, reported that business at Charley Rand's new store was brisk, and Randville booming. Ol' Charley, he reported, was parcelling out his land to settlers with

families—who naturally would trade at his store. One of them had already set up a blacksmith shop in Randville, another was building a rooming-house, and there was talk of plans to build a church. Already there was a petition in for a post office—which Diamond City lacked—and Rand was talking of starting a bank. Sooner or later, folks were saying, a new county would be organized and Randville would get the county seat.

"Not likely," observed Smoky Sikes, "unless the Diamond X runs out of ca'tridges!"

Young Dike McLaren kicked all this talk into the back of his mind as no concern of his, and set himself to the task of soaking up all the science of hoss and cow that he could, for he wanted mighty bad to make a hand.

His first chance to do anything but wrangle horses came when the Diamond X wagon had been out about a month. That was when two of the crew swapped words, gun smoke, and hot lead, leaving one of them to bury and the other gone yonder. A few days later Smoky Sikes took on a drifter to wrangle horses and graduated Dike to cow work and a string of his own. The promotion set him up, but he made no brags about it.

It was about this time that Bill Diamond sent word out that Charley Rand was going to throw a big free dance to celebrate the news that Randville's petition for a post office had been approved.

"Bill wants us to be plumb neighborly," Smoky Sikes told his crew, with a bat of his coyote eyes that Dike failed to see. "His orders is for us to ride in an' help liven up Ol' Charley's *baile* for him. The cook an' the hoss wrangler can hold down the wagon."

On the fifteen-mile ride to Randville, Smoky Sikes and his Diamond X crew seemed to Dike to be in unusually high spirits. But their arrival at the dance didn't seem to him very "neighborly."

Charley Rand had had a temporary outdoor platform built out of lumber hauled in two hundred miles for other building purposes. On it, by the light of kerosene lanterns, the dance was on in full swing when the Diamond X crew swooped in at a gallop to circle it in a fog of dust, squalling like wild Injuns and shooting off their six-guns. Nester women screamed and some of the dancers dived for the cover of rough wooden benches; but the fiddlers kept on playing, and except for bullets putting out three of the lanterns no harm was done.

Dike took no part in the shooting, but when Smoky and the rest tied their horses off a piece under some cottonwoods and came back to the pavilion afoot, he came with them.

Old Charley Rand met them with a big basket in his hand.

"Boys," he said quietly, "you scared some of the folks considerable with all that shootin', but I reckon you didn't mean no harm. As there wasn't nobody hurt, we don't aim to make an issue of it. All I want to say is that we're decent, respectable folks here, and you boys are welcome to join us—just as long as you behave like gentlemen."

"You got any reason to think we ain't gentlemen, Mr. Rand?" Smoky Sikes challenged him.

"Why, I hope not, boys," said Charley Rand in his quiet way. "Will you kindly deposit your pistols in this basket till you're ready to go home?"

"I ain't safe for no gal to dance with without my hawgleg to hold me down!" protested one cowboy with a

loud laugh.

Smoky Sikes unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it in the basket. "Throw 'em in, boys," he advised with a faintly contemptuous grin. "There ain't nobody in Randville too salty to handle barehanded!"

Without their hardware, the Diamond X crew flocked up on the platform to dance. The first round they danced with each other, with considerable rough and rollicky horseplay. On the second some found nester-gal partners willing to dance with them.

Smoky Sikes himself was not so lucky. The girl he picked refused to come out on the floor with him. Dike saw him tugging insistently and none too gently at her arm. He saw old Charley Rand walk up to Smoky and the girl. Dike sidled around that way just in time to hear Old Charley say:

"Where I was raised, Sikes, a man wasn't considered much of a gentleman that tried to force a lady to dance with him against her will."

"You mind your own damn business, Rand!" Smoky spoke sullenly. As Old Charley laid a restraining hand on his arm, he pivoted suddenly and hit the older man, hard-fisted, in the mouth. Seeing the quiet-spoken little man knocked down suddenly made Dike McLaren see red.

"Looky here, Smoky!" he said, seizing the brawny wagon boss by the shoulder to whirl him around. "You cain't—"

He saw Smoky's fist coming too late to duck, then suddenly found himself on the floor, trying to get up.

Oh, Lord! he thought. *My first fight an' here I am, whipped without even gittin' started!*

But even the agony of Smoky's boot toe driven hard into his ribs did not keep him down. Somehow he got to his feet long enough to land a wallop to Smoky's chin that knocked him down. Dike wiped blood from his mouth and waited for the big wagon boss to get up. As Smoky came to his feet, ready to lunge for him, Dike swung a wide haymaker at his jaw. Midway of the swing the hard edge of a plank bench, swung by another Diamond X cowboy, struck him, and Dike knew by the limp way it dropped to his side that his right arm was broken.

In the wild free-for-all that followed, somebody smashed a kerosene lantern and the spilled oil spread flame to the underpinnings of the platform. By the time the Diamond X crew broke free and ran for their horses, half the dry lumber of the pavilion seemed to be aflame. Somehow the Diamond X men must have located Charley Rand's gun-basket on their way, for they rode off into the dark, shooting and yelling contemptuous defiance. Dike realized now why Bill Diamond had sent his roundup crew to the dance.

Despite his broken arm, he joined the Randville folks in trying to put out the fire. But the lumber was sun-cured and tinder-dry. The best they could do was to keep the flames from spreading to the near-by store building.

With Randville's gay pavilion a smoldering heap of red-hot ashes, Dike found himself facing Old Charley Rand, smoke-grimed and grim, but outwardly calm.

"Better come over to my house, my young Christian friend," Old Charley was saying. "I'll set that busted arm."

Charley Rand's bachelor quarters and store shared the same unpainted plank building. The whiskered little man did a neat job of setting and splint-

ing Dike's broken arm, and the bed he rigged up in a back room was comfortable.

"Best lodge here with me till that arm gets well," he advised, and gratefully Dike stayed.

Charley Rand had nothing to say about the burning of his pavilion lumber, but Dike heard him arranging with several settlers who owned teams to haul in more.

"Mr. Rand," Dike asked him on the third day after the fire, "ain't you aiming to do anything about them Diamond X coyotes burning your pavilion?"

Soberly Old Charley shook his head. "I never was no hand for gun fightin'," he said.

"But the law—"

"The law in Dobbs County is under Bill Diamond's thumb. I'd be wastin' my time to appeal to it. But what I *am* aimin' to do is stick here an' bring in good honest folks for settlers till we build up into a big enough community to organize a new county where the law won't be beholden to nobody. Maybe I'll make some money doin' it—maybe I won't. But it's going to be a right smart job, an' I've been thinking I might need a pardner—some young feller—to maybe look after the ranch end of the business."

From the way he said it, Dike couldn't fail to understand what he was driving at, but he didn't say anything. He was aware of a growing admiration and warmth of feeling toward Old Charley Rand. But what had a greenhorn youngster, without a cent to his name—and already 'way yonder in debt to Bill Diamond—to offer in any such partnership?

"Meanwhile," Charley Rand was saying, "you're welcome here anyhow till that arm gets well."

"Thanks, Mr. Rand," said Dike. "I won't burden you no longer than I can help."

What happened thereafter happened quick.

The next Sunday, with Rand away on business and the store closed, Dike took a notion to ease his restlessness by saddling a nag and riding over to Buffalo Draw. He wanted not only to ride, but also to satisfy his curiosity about what had ever happened to the disputed fence line. Almost as an afterthought he stuck a Winchester in the scabbard under his leg.

In Buffalo Draw he came onto a five-man crew of Diamond X men hastily stringing wire. Without waiting to see who he was or what he wanted, they opened fire on him at a distance, and it made Dike mad. He dropped back behind a cluster of boulders, got out of the saddle quick, found a good rock to kneel behind, and to the tune of bullets spattering the rock in front of him, opened fire. Even obliged to trigger with his left hand, he found his old squirrel-shooting skill had not left him. At his first shot one man went down. Then he missed one, and knocked over two more. By that time the remaining two were running for their horses, and he let them go.

At that moment his eye caught a lazy lift of smoke rolling up into the sky in the direction of Randville. It took no expert reasoning to figure what was happening. Taking advantage of a quiet Sunday, a closed store, and Old Charley Rand's absence, Bill Diamond had turned loose his wolves, sending one crew to throw up this fence, another to burn Rand out.

As quick as he could, Dike got to his horse. But the pony, spooked by

the shooting, let in to buck when he tried to mount. Handicapped by his bad arm, Dike was thrown before he ever really got a-straddle of the saddle. In falling, his head struck a rock with a wallop that knocked him cold.

When he came to, he was bedded down in the back end of a buckboard, his feet lashed together with rope. The two men in the seat were Deputy Sheriff Al Weeks and Bill Diamond, who lost no time in informing him that he was on his way to the county seat, under arrest for murder.

"Murder?" The word struck him deep. "Hell, I was shot at, an' I shot back! That ain't—"

"Al Weeks and me both saw you sneak up an' dry-gulch Smoky Sikes and two more of my best men," said Bill Diamond, coldly venomous. "We'll swear to it in court, an' you'll hang for murder, kid." He paused. "Or would you rather testify that you saw Charley Rand do it?"

"Mr. Rand was away at Dobbstown on business," said Dike quietly. "An' you damn well knew it, or you wouldn't have picked this particular time to burn him out!"

"*Me* burn him out?" Bill Diamond laughed. "Is it my fault them Randville nesters ain't careful with fire?"

The drive to the county seat took nearly two days, but Dike managed to make it with no more than a dozen words, keeping silence even in response to Bill Diamond's cactus-tongued gigging.

His second day in jail they let a keen-eyed elderly lawyer named John Crocker in to see him.

"They won't let Charley Rand see you, son," Crocker told him. "But he's hired me to defend you, and I bring you his word that he aims to see you through if it costs him every penny he's got."

Dike did not try to hide his surprise. "Why, Mr. Rand don't owe me no such obligation as that!" he exclaimed. "'Course I'm much obliged to him, but—"

"Charley Rand," broke in Lawyer Crocker, "is a queer man; but he's all leather and won't stretch. He is convinced that but for his feud with Bill Diamond, you would never have got into this trouble. So he figures he owes you a chance to get out of it. Besides—" John Crocker smiled—"I believe old Charley likes you."

"He practically offered to take me in as a pardner," said Dike. "I'd about made up my mind to throw in with him for all I was worth when—when this happened."

"Charley would be pleased to hear you say so," observed John Crocker in his precise way. "He has sent to Fort Worth for Judge Thompson, considered the best criminal lawyer in Texas, to assist me in your defense. By God, we'll acquit you of this charge, son, or damn well know the reason why!"

When Dike McLaren was brought swiftly to trial in the plank-squeaky Dobbstown courthouse, they "damn well knew the reason why" he could not be acquitted: namely, that Bill Diamond wanted him convicted and hanged for having quit the Diamond X to throw in with Charley Rand. And in that region, one way or another, Bill Diamond generally managed to get what he wanted. In this case he was out to show Charley Rand, once and for all, which way the toad hopped.

Lawyers Crocker and Thompson put up a stiff legal fight, but with no way to prove that the alleged eye-witness

testimony of Al Weeks, Bill Diamond, and two of his cowboys was perjury, they never had a chance. In a day and country where killing a man in fair fight was a commonly accepted practice, sentiment against "dry-gulching" was particularly bitter.

Old Charley Rand stayed away from the prisoner during the trial. Daily he sat on the same front row seat just outside the rail, a meek-looking little man, occasionally twisting his whiskers.

By late afternoon of the third day the case was ready for the jury. On the faces of most of the jurymen, as Judge Follett droned out his instructions, the fate of Dike McLaren was plainly written.

"—*And you are further instructed that the legal penalty for murder is hanging*—"

From his chair at the defense table, Lawyer John Crocker looked at Old Charley Rand, his lips silently forming the single word: "Lost!"

"—*And you are further instructed*—"

On the front row Charley Rand suddenly stood up. In his hands were two cocked six-shooters, drawn, like as not, from his boot tops. At the same instant four masked men stepped in through the door at the back of the courtroom, equally well supplied with ready shooting equipment. Rand's guns were pointed in the direction of the sheriff, Deputy Sheriff Weeks, and Bill Diamond, inside the rail.

"Judge," said Old Charley in his quiet drawl, his small wrinkled face drawn and white. "I've come here to see justice done! Dike—you get to the door, quick! An' don't nobody move!"

For a moment nobody did except Dike McLaren. Then Bill Diamond and Al Weeks sprang up, cursing and clawing for their guns. Swiftly, calmly, Old Charley Rand shot them both down. Thereafter nobody did move, for certain.

Swiftly, shielding Dike McLaren with their bodies, their six-guns ready, Rand and his masked accomplices backed out of the courtroom, shut and locked the door behind them.

Fear, surprise, caution, confusion—whatever it was that delayed the action of the sheriff and of Bill Diamond's own men—Rand, Dike McLaren, and their four companions were able to get to their waiting horses and away without a single bullet to dodge. Out of Dobbstown southwestward they rode at a dead gallop.

Five miles out the four masked men, still masked and without having spoken a word, raised their quirts in a gesture of good luck and scattered as Rand and McLaren rode on.

Thanks to the relays of fresh horses for which Old Charley Rand had arranged in advance, the inevitable pursuit never did overtake them.

Once over the line into New Mexico Territory, there were no more relays, and they took it a little easier. But even then, except at occasional outlying *placitas* to buy food, and in hidden meadow canyons to let their horses rest and graze, they did not pause.

To Dike the green-timbered, sparsely settled mountains of New Mexico seemed far away enough to offer secure refuge. But Old Charley Rand shook his head.

"We're hunted men, now, Dike," he said. "There ain't nowheres for us to go but Mexico—and we won't never dare come back!"

Dike thought of all the lost hopes and plans this strange little man had nurtured in his heart for the building

of his little town of Randville into a thriving county seat.

"You should have let them hang me, Charley," he said soberly. "My life ain't worth what-all you've given up."

He saw the gray little man straighten up in the saddle with a sort of stubborn pride.

"It was my property you was defending when you got into this fix," he said, as if for him that settled it.

Who the masked men were that Rand had gotten to help him, or what became of them, Dike McLaren never knew. But he was aware, even before they crossed the Border into Mexico, that the experience had made a broken man of Charley Rand.

For three years Dike stayed with him in Mexico, punching cows for a British cattle outfit, with Old Charley wrangling their commissary. But a lonesome feeling for the life he might lead back in the land of his own kind of people never left him. Dike McLaren had no heart for permanent exile.

When word came to them through another fugitive from Texas that the two Diamond X cowboys surviving that Sunday fence fight, being no longer under fear of Bill Diamond, had admitted the true nature of Dike McLaren's killing, it was Old Charley himself who suggested that Dike return to the United States—maybe New Mexico or Arizona—to live out his own life as he pleased. As for himself, Old Charley Rand no longer wanted to return, even if it were safe. The knife of tragedy had cut him too deep.

"I'm gettin' old, an' I've got this little job here. I'll make out all right," he urged. "But you're young and you've got your life ahead of you. You've stuck to me mighty loyal, Dike, but now I sure 'nough wish you'd go."

That was when Dike McLaren had come to Corazon, the little cow town nestled sweetly in the New Mexico hills, and by quietly going to work on a cow ranch, minding his own business, and keeping his mouth shut, had won for himself the place of substance and respect that led to his election as county sheriff. With the achievement of that ambition, that symbol of honest and reliable citizenship to help shade out the past, it had been a strong, sweet notion in Dike McLaren's heart that he would ask yellow-haired, smiling, blue-eyed Jean Campbell to marry him.

Then, from the foreman of the British outfit he had ridden for in Mexico, a delayed message had finally reached him. Old Charley Rand had suffered a stroke. He might die any time, but was likely to live for years, the Mexican doctor had said, helpless and unable to care for himself. The old man, the message said, had spoken of him often. Could he manage to come?

Corazon— In Spanish the word meant "heart," and for Dike McLaren it was a town well named . . . Corazon —a bright new sheriff's star—a girl with yellow hair—

Against the memory of a gray little man standing in the smoke of guns in a Texas courtroom to see justice done at the cost of all he had, against the vision of a broken old man helpless and alone in exile, not even these could stand.

That was why, within two days after Dike McLaren was elected sheriff of Corazon County, he resigned—to ride away in the gray of dawn, with few farewells and no explanation, not knowing when, if ever, he might return.

Old Cowhands Never Die

By GIFF CHESHIRE

BEING FORCIBLY TURNED OUT *to pasture is no joke. After having done just that to Poke Kimberly five years ago, old Buck Oakmaster now stubbornly refuses to face the same set of facts about himself. By doing so, he threatens to ruin the Sunbonnet spread—until, somehow, the lesson taught a fourteen-year-old boy seeps into an old man's consciousness. This thoughtful tale is here published for the first time.*

OLD POKE could tell from Tod's wet hair that the boy had been in the creek despite his broad air of conscientious innocence.

"How long was you gone?" Poke asked, easing his skinny haunches in the saddle.

"Gone where?"

"Swimming."

For a moment he was afraid the kid was going to lie to him. He watched color climb into Tod's cheeks, and the boy shifted his weight on the drowsy old mare he was riding. But Tod had his father's direct gaze and open manner, mixed with his grandfather's impetuous spunk. Neither Herb Tenny nor old Buck Oakmaster were liars.

"My hair," Tod said, grinning a little. "If you'd give me fifteen minutes more, Poke, I'd of had it dry. How'd you know it wasn't sweat?"

"Because I know nobody was watching them horses, like your dad told you to!" Poke exploded. "They'd mosied into the marshes, just like he warned you. Lucky I hazed 'em out before any bogged, or he'd skin you alive."

For the first time, Tod Tenny looked

really scared. "Lord a'mighty, don't tell him, Poke, or he'll make me stay home."

"Reason he put you on wranglin' was to let you prove yourself ready to go on roundup, wasn't it? And you been soldierin'. You aim to cheat your way out with the boys?"

"Don't tell him, Poke!" Tod's voice was desperate. "Didn't do any harm, did it?"

"Might of, left up to you."

Tod turned angrily away, too proud to beg, resuming the tedious chore of watching the saddle band. The chuck wagon and most of the band had left at noon that day for the roundup corrals on the high desert. The Sunbonnet buckaroos would ride out in the morning on spring calf roundup, and Herb Tenny had wanted this bunch kept close in, feeding on the marshy lake margin until corralled at sundown. The regular wrangler having left with the chuck wagon, he'd put his fourteen-year-old boy Tod to the task of close-herding them.

It was the first really hot day of spring, and old Poke Kimberly could understand a boy's hankering to dunk himself in the creek for the first time of the season. Yet for the past two years Tod had been pestering his father to let him make a regular hand on roundup. This year Herb had told him he could go, but Poke knew the decision would be reversed in a minute if he learned about this. There were lots of ways Poke figured Herb was too strict with the boy—too determined to hold him to his own grim, unyielding pattern—but that was none of a busted down old cowpoke's business.

Poke rode back toward headquarters knowing he wouldn't peach on Tod, just as Tod knew it. That wasn't the point. He didn't like to see Tod start to practice deceit to get around the strict rules his father laid down for him. From long experience, Poke knew what would happen at the supper table, come evening:

"*Well, how'd you make out?*" Herb Tenny would ask his son. "*Fine,*" Tod would answer, and for a day or so afterward he would avoid Poke Kimberly's eyes. It was a bad habit for a boy to get into, even if it was a small thing, even if no harm had been done.

Poke's thin mouth puckered into a grimace. Nobody could blame Herb Tenny for training his son too hard, when he himself had spent fifteen years trying to live up to the expectations of a demanding father-in-law. Right now it was hard to see how Herb could even bother his head with such small matters as whether he should start taking the boy on roundup. Fact was, though Buck didn't know it, there mightn't be any roundup if the old fire-eater didn't simmer down and stop rough-riding the crew.

When Tod brought the saddle band in to the corrals, just before supper time, Poke was still dejected and thoughtful. The punchers, as they rode in in twos and threes, were still sullen, he observed. Tod went up to the big house without looking Poke's way, and the hands began to wash up for supper.

Seated on the chopping-block on the shady side of the bunkhouse, Poke could see Herb and old Buck talking on the porch. Whatever it was, he could tell it had both heated. Wasn't often Herb talked up to the old coot, but now he had to or run the risk of having every able-bodied buckaroo on the pay roll quit on him on the eve of spring roundup. Poke had heard the bunkhouse talk, the night before. The

boys weren't riding out another time under Buck Oakmaster, not after the way he had unjustifiedly eaten the seats out of half a dozen pairs of pants the other day. Looked like they'd served notice on Herb.

The only way Poke Kimberly learned anything, anymore, was by watching and adding up. Once he'd been a top rider on Sunbonnet. Now he was a little ashamed of the wicked satisfaction it gave him to see the way Buck Oakmaster was acting up, these days. It had been a different story when he turned Poke Kimberly out to pasture, almost by force.

"Hell, Poke!" Buck had snorted, that day, "you're getting old. As a rider, you ain't worth your pay! You make it hard on the other boys—dangerous, sometimes. Lots of easier jobs around here you can still do. You start tomorrow. Them's orders."

It wasn't easy for a man to hang up his saddle. Buck was finding that out himself now, five years later. For the last couple of years there had been talk about his retiring and turning the big outfit fully over to his son-in-law. But instead of facing it, Buck had hung on like a bulldog, growing testier every day, making himself thoroughly loathed by a crew that once had liked him.

In spite of Herb Tenny's maneuverings, Buck had announced his intentions of running the calf roundup again this year with all the tough truculence he had developed to cover his growing decrepitude. It gave old Poke a kind of pleasure he did not like. He had every reason to be grateful to Buck. A lot of outfits simply fired a man when he got too old to work. Yet Buck had made a place for Poke Kimberly, an easy, poke-around place that would be his till the day he died.

Things on Sunbonnet were in a fine mess, Poke decided as the cook's wrangler, left behind to come on with the riders, blew the big horn for supper. It was really none of his concern, but it had taken away his appetite and he was the first to leave the table.

Neither Herb nor Buck had been there, and as he came out Poke saw Herb helping himself to a drink at the watering-trough. Herb was a big, square-cut man with curly hair turned gray at the temples. He actually owed nothing to old Buck, no matter what the old coot thought, for he had already been foreman on Sunbonnet when he married Buck's only girl, Lenore. She had died giving birth to Tod, and Herb was still only the foreman, with no more say than he'd had way back there, and probably at the same wages. Herb grinned at Poke.

"Feel up to the roundup, this year, Poke? Maybe you and me and Tod and Buck'll have to run it alone."

"You tell him what the boys say?"

Herb nodded. "Only set him worse. Told me to fire 'em and go get a new crew. Where you going to hire a crew this time of year? Won't, anyhow. The boys're right. He's gone outta his way to rile 'em. Last fall he made the whole beef roundup billy hell for ever'body. Well, it's his spread, and damned if I ain't about concluded he can have it. If it wasn't for Tod, by damn, I'd tell him. Tod's his kin."

Poke's lips parted in a bleak grin. In all these years, he guessed, Herb had never so unburdened himself to anybody. But he was picking Poke Kimberly for the purpose now only because Poke wasn't an integral part of the outfit, anymore. It was kind of like cussing to the hitching-post.

"Hell, Poke, he's getting old," Herb

resumed. "Just gums things up, trying to hang on. But try and tell him that."

It was almost what Buck himself had told Poke Kimberly, one time, with a bluntness that was meant to be kind. Poke wondered what Buck would say if he reminded him of it. But Poke Kimberly didn't have any say in the matter, while Buck Oakmaster did.

Herb headed for the cookhouse to eat. Poke picked up a stick and fished out his knife. Presently he threw the stick away and shoved the knife back into his pocket. Tod came out of the cookhouse, again avoiding Poke and recrossing to the big house. The wooden-faced punchers emerged and disappeared into the bunkhouse. They'd wait until morning, Poke knew; then, if there had been no change in plans, would call for their time and pack their war bags. Some of them, though younger than Poke, had ridden for Sunbonnet as long as he had.

The evenings were the longest of the year now, light lingering long after the sun had dropped behind the torn tips of the Rincos. Yet the fading hours, Poke knew, were bringing Sunbonnet to a quiet, devastating crisis such as he had never known in his time. He was heading for the bunkhouse when old Buck's bull voice summoned him from the porch of the big house. Poke turned up the hard-beaten path, his worn boot heels dragging a little.

Buck was sitting on a bannister, flipping his jackknife and sticking it in the wall of the house, a habit he indulged in whenever he was thinking out a difficult problem. There were days on end when he didn't seem to know Poke Kimberly was on the spread, but in spite of the full truculence of his face, he gave Poke a grin.

"Poke, what the hell's wrong with the boys?"

Poke took seat on the bannister, fishing out his own jackknife. He opened the small blade, flipped, and stuck the knife less than a half inch from Buck's.

"You," Poke said.

He could hear the surge of breath into Buck's huge chest. He turned and looked at his boss, mildly but without uncertainty. Buck Oakmaster was a fine specimen of a man, broad and hard-fleshed, ruddy-complexioned under a thick mat of snowy hair. The trouble was, his appearance deceived him more than anybody else. Poke knew him to be five years younger than himself, which put him close to seventy.

"I see Herb got to you first," Buck grunted.

It angered Poke, and he didn't trouble to conceal it. He had his chance to gloat now, to tell Buck it was time he hung up his saddle, to tell him he was so old that in active status he was a handicap to Sunbonnet rather than a help. Buck had let Poke Kimberly have it, bluntly and without preparation, five years ago. But Poke guessed there was no parallel, since Buck owned Sunbonnet and could do with it as he pleased.

"For the past year," Poke said, "you've chawed tail like a stove-up old bear in a corner. It's got the boys ringy. Roundup's hard enough, without somebody to raise billy hell all day long. They got to the point where they'll ride for Herb, but they won't for you. Now, don't you go bristlin' at me, Buck. You asked me, and I told you." Poke rose.

"Damn his mangy hide!" Buck breathed. "Herb Tenny's been trying to force me out the past couple of years. He's turned 'em against me. He

had the gall tonight to tell me he runs things or Sunbonnet is going to pot! Hell of a thing to tell the man who built it up from nothing."

"That's what you think!" Poke snorted. "For the past twenty years, anyhow, you've had Herb helping you. And a danged good crew of riders. They had something to do with making Sunbonnet. Herb tell you they won't ride out under you, in the morning?"

"He did, and the devil with 'em!"

Poke shrugged and left. He was surprised he had got away with talking to Buck like that, yet it was just as odd that Buck had wanted his opinion on what was wrong. He knew he had been the hitching-post again, just as he had been with Herb. There were times when a man had nobody to talk to, even on a spread as big as this. Old Poke Kimberly had passed beyond usefulness, beyond desires and schemings of his own, and was a safe repository for other people's troubles.

There were a couple of hours of daylight left. Poke caught a horse out of the night band, saddled, and rode out. He hadn't seen young Tod around since supper, and had an idea where he had gone. Poke rode east into the foothills, following the creek. He found Tod at the fish traps, as he had expected, his unsaddled old mare, wearing a hackamore, near by.

Poke swung down. The evening before they had built the traps of willows, and he saw in a glance at the clear, cold water that they had a catch of trout. Yet there was no excitement in Tod Tenny's young face—nor was there animosity, now.

"Looks like we'll have trout for breakfast," Poke said with forced cheer. "If we clean 'em, that is. That blasted chuck-wrangler never will."

"Poke, I lied to Dad. He had me in a corner before I could think. First I didn't figure it was a lie just not telling something nobody needs to know. But I guess it is. He told me I had to make a hand around home before I could start riding. Them horses I wasn't watching could of got into real trouble if you hadn't come along. But I couldn't tell him. Poke, I got to go on the roundup this year. Been thinking about it all winter." Tod pitched a pebble into the creek.

Poke didn't lay it on, nor did he point out that rueful hindsight wasn't exactly atonement.

"Dang it, Poke!" Tod blazed out. "That seems like such a little thing!"

"The lie don't."

"Well, no, not the lie."

"The thing was big enough you figured you had to lie, didn't you? Something inside told you it was big, didn't it? Everybody knows Buck's willed the spread to you. He won't last much longer. Your dad's trying to get you ready. Makes it kind of hard, but he's got it to do. Hard on your dad, too, I guess. That will, when Buck made it, was a slap in his face, but your dad never hollered. Why'n't you go tell him you lied and take your medicine?"

"I won't stay home over a little thing like that!" Tod said harshly. He swung up on the mare and rode off.

Poke opened the traps so the trout could escape. A bleakness hit him that kept him hunkered on the bank, rolling and smoking cigarettes. Buck Oakmaster was the key to the whole situation. "*You make it hard on the others,*" Buck had told Poke Kimberly five years before.

Yet Poke had no taste for seeing the tables turned. The shock of being forced out to pasture was a severe one,

requiring an adjustment so difficult it was nigh impossible for younger people to understand. Yet the age that forced it, no man could stop. Trouble was, Buck was in a position to rebel against it, making it worse all around. Probably Poke Kimberly was the only man on Sunbonnet who really understood. Well, he had cussed out his boss for the first time in his life, which was all he could do.

Poke knew that after five years he hadn't completely gotten over the secret revolt, himself. It was human to hate the ravages of time, the lessened energies and keenness and capability that Buck tried to cover with increasing rancor against those not yet sharing his fate. In spite of his outward acceptance of his lot, Poke now confessed to a continuing resentment of his own against younger men. Men who in time would themselves grow old and give it the same rocking hatred.

As he considered Tod and Herb and Buck, and finally himself, an odd thought struck Poke. For all its bleakness, maybe old age was best. There was Herb Tenny in the responsible middle years, which he was trying so hard to train Tod to meet. Of the four, Poke felt sorriest for Herb, caught by his love for Lenore Oakmaster in a lifelong trap. And next for Tod, caught between the quick, compelling impulses of boyhood and the growing need to be responsible and mature.

Poke Kimberly, at least, had passed beyond all that. His needs were few and simple and easily met. He could share a part of Tod's youth and build fish traps without having to consider the exacting future.

He tossed his last cigarette stub into the creek and rose knowing that he did still face the future and that this was his lingering regret. The sense of its shortness was the thing that disturbed a man. The effort to keep from thinking about it was itself a continual brooding.

Night was running in over the flats and marshy lowlands about the lake when Poke rode out of the foothills. Lamplight in the distant buildings made a cheerful daub in the gathering dark. Poke rode in at a jingling trot and turned the horse into the corral. The bunkhouse, when he passed it, was unusually quiet, and the cookhouse was dark. Night before the start of a roundup was usually a time of excitement, skylarking and activity. Yet Sunbonnet seemed dead, or frozen into a deadlock of wills. Poke wondered what would happen at daybreak, when Herb Tenny roused the outfit, and knew that it all depended on what old Buck had to say, come morning.

As he stepped onto the porch, Poke heard Buck's grunt.

"Left my jackknife," Poke said. There was a moment of silence, in which he watched Buck's thick shape in the night.

"Set awhile," Buck said, and there was the merest trace of warmth in his voice. "What happens after all this?"

"You been the one mucking things up. Figure that out yourself."

"Hell, I don't mean Sunbonnet. Ain't you ever wondered?"

Poke gave it slow thought, realizing that he wondered all the time. It touched something deeply sensitive in him to know that he had been right about Buck. There was no fear like the fear of an old person alone. Buck was seeking him, because he had been over the trail at least a little way ahead, and Poke saw now that this was why the others sought him, also.

An odd warmth started in him, slight but persistent.

For the first time he had a sense of not being at the end of anything. It came to him in slow wonder that in all the changes of his life there had been an increase in awareness. What had always been a blind spot had revealed itself suddenly as holding important meaning, and he wondered now if a man's final step might not be a stepping through such a blind spot into something unglimpsed previously. And with the wonder came a sense of easing, almost of conviction, and he was glad Buck had asked the question.

Yet he had no ready words with which to answer, for wisdom was knowing without explanation, and no man could communicate it to another. He wished he could tell Buck that with the exactions of ambition behind, a man could devote himself to the simple pleasures so much like childhood, that this was why old people, in closer sympathy and with more leisure for the so-called trivialities, could be a stronger influence over the young than could the in-betweeners weighted by passing cares. But he couldn't; it had taken him five years to learn that, himself.

"Of all the people on Sunbonnet," Poke said, "I'd least rather be in Tod's boots."

"You would?"

"Next least, in Herb Tenny's. Man spends his kid days learning how to act when he grows up. When he's grown he worries about the mistakes he's made and likely still will make and about what's happened and still's going to."

"Me," Buck said, on a rising note, "I'd swap places with Tod in a minute! Even with Herb Tenny, blast his scheming hide!"

"Herb never schemed for nothing except to do his job and raise his boy right, and you know it, Buck. If you figure for a minute he's got a eye on Sunbonnet, you're crazy. You just been making that a excuse to put off turning things over to him. If you figure you can hold out till Tod's old enough, you better check your figures. Five years ago you told me to hang up my saddle. Mcbbe you don't know it, but I was just your age, then."

"Damn it, Poke, there was still a place for you."

"Who said you won't have one?"

"I couldn't stand not having anything to do."

"Who said you wouldn't have?"

A figure emerged at the end of the porch, then the slim shape of young Tod mounted the steps. He said, "Evening, Buck. That you, Poke? Well, I told Dad, and I don't ride out in the morning. Dang it all, anyhow."

"What's this?" Buck demanded.

"Dad wanted me to graze the saddle band down in the marshes, this afternoon, so's they'd be handy to corral, this evening. I took a little swim in the creek. Poke caught me at it."

"He tell on you?"

"No, but he kept at me till I told Dad. Heck of a thing to have to stay home for!"

"It is?" Buck asked sharply. "Was you running Sunbonnet, would you put a man on night guard, say, you couldn't trust to stay on the job?"

"This ain't the same thing."

"It isn't, huh? Poke was right. Man running a cow spread's too busy to have to check on his help all the time. He's got to be able to trust 'em. Afore he can do that, he's got to be able to trust hisself. Your dad's right about

that, anyhow. You want a man's job here, you got to show you can fill it. Stop poutin', and take your medicine."

Buck Oakmaster watched his grandson move off, then spoke softly, almost to himself: "Damned if a kid don't have it kind of tough. Mebbe if he behaves himself all summer he can go out on beef roundup this fall. Won't do to let him know that, though. He's got to learn his lesson."

"You made a fine speech there," Poke said. "But for twenty years you been working a man you don't trust, and giving him just the dirty part of the work, at that."

"Who's that?"

"Herb Tenny. But the part I liked best was about Tod stopping pouting and taking his medicine. You think it's any easier for a kid his age than a notional old coot yours?"

"Why, damn your hide, Poke!" Buck exploded. "Wish I had no more worries than Tod's got."

"Big to him," Poke said, and rose. "He's got to learn to work, and you got to learn not to. He don't understand what's happening to him, any more than you do what's happening to you. Reckon nobody ever does till he gets where he can look back on it. Bunkhouse light's out. I'm going to hit the hay."

"Wait a minute, Poke. Never knew you took that kind of interest in Tod."

"Got lots of time for it," Poke said, and moved toward the steps.

He nearly ran into Herb Tenny, who came around the corner of the house and bounded up. Herb said, "That you, Poke? Wait a minute. I want a witness." He strode on, and Poke turned around and waited.

Herb's voice was like the rasping of a file on the edge of sheet iron. "Buck, I been wanting to tell you for years where you could put this spread of yours if it wasn't for Tod. But it's not his fault nor mine that his mother's blood was part yours. I been asking myself all evening if it's worth it to train him to take your place, someday. Damned if I blame him for going swimming this afternoon, the first real warm day of spring. Wish to hell I'd been along. Wish I'd had time to build fish traps with him, and all the things Poke's been doing. Aim to have it from here on."

"You mean you're quitting?" Buck's voice was low.

"In the morning, with the rest of the outfit. Tod's only a quarter you, but he's half me. And I hope you bust Sunbonnet flatter'n a pancake, so I won't ever feel I took something away from him. But in case you don't, I want Poke to witness your word you won't let this make any difference far as he's concerned."

"You mean you stayed here all this time just because of Tod?"

"That's just exactly what I mean, mister."

"Well, I'll be damned," Buck said. He said no more while Herb swung on his heel and walked off.

Poke waited, knowing he was the only one who saw all the pieces of this situation simply because he was a man with whom nobody felt the need of maintaining a guard anymore. It had been wonderful hearing Herb's rebellion, at last, against the tyranny he had endured for years. But Herb was mad, and what he proposed to do wasn't wise, and when he cooled off he'd regret it. Still, Poke was most concerned about Buck, all at once, for Buck was old and few there were who understood what that was like. Several

times that evening he had suspected a softening in him, a feeling that the only thing that had kept him from yielding in time had been the fact that he had made a stand from which pride would not permit his retreating. For him to give in now was impossible.

"By God!" Buck breathed. "Funny how a man can be blind to something for so long. Always figured I was cock of the walk around here, with everybody envying me. So Herb's been wanting to tell me all these years what I could do with Sunbonnet. Poke, there's more man there than a fellow realizes at first. Funny how a man can see something he's been looking at for years for the first time."

Poke grinned in the darkness. It was worth something, at least, that Buck should figure that he wasn't giving up so much, after all, when he retired. It would stop him from looking back until he got into the habit of looking ahead again. Poke Kimberly was quite certain now that there was a long way to look in that direction still, both for Buck and himself. The serenity he had felt at the fish traps returned to him.

Thus he was not surprised at what Buck said next. "Poke, you got a way with everybody. Go tell Herb I want him to take the roundup out, come daybreak—hell, no, I aim to tell him myself."

Poke rocked a while after Buck left. It wasn't going to be so bad holding down the home ranch with the outfit away if he was to have both Tod and old Buck here. The very young and the very old, with those between doing the grueling, sweating work of the place. With Tod hoping to make it out on beef roundup in the fall. With Buck Oakmaster and Poke Kimberly waiting to see what lay behind the next and final blind spot. . . .

MAKING HIMSELF AT HOME

"Do you know Mr. Popper?" asked a saloonkeeper of one of his customers.

"I've heard of him," said the customer, "but I don't know that I ever met him."

"Well, you ought to make his acquaintance," said the saloon man. "He's a nice agreeable gentleman. I never saw him until night before last, when he came in here about twelve o'clock and took a drink. He's a man who makes himself at home with you at once. Why, he had hardly been in here five minutes before he drew out his six-shooter and began shooting holes through the pictures, the lamps, and other little notions about the place just as familiarly as though he and I had been boys together. Nothing cold and distant about him! He's a charming fellow—charming!"

—From *The Big Bonanza*, by Dan de Quille.

Answers to "Western Trails" Quiz on Page 114

1. Bozeman Trail.
2. Goodnight-Loving Trail.
3. Chisholm Trail.
4. Western Trail.
5. Santa Fe Trail.
6. Oregon Trail.
7. Texas Trail.
8. Mullan Road.
9. Barlow Trail.
10. Applegate Road.

They Went West—First!

By W. H. HUTCHINSON

THE MOUNTAIN MEN stood first among all the colorful characters who won the West. Hell-raising, hair-lifting swashbucklers—many of them—often illiterate, generally profane and upsettingly amoral, still they made a substantial contribution to the westward expansion of the United States. The author attempts to put the role they played in perspective in this heretofore unpublished article.

THEY came pounding into some rendezvous under the nameless peaks or into the settlements on the fringe of civilization, and when they did they raised hell and put a chunk under it!

They came in from living alone, for months or years on end, in the very midst of the fightingest of all mountain Indians: the Blackfeet, the Devil's Own. They came in from setting their beaver traps in the streams that flow three ways from the Great Divide, wading waist-deep in the rushing, icy waters until the marrow of their bones ached from the cold and the pain of old wounds was as when they had been first sustained.

They measured their take of peltries against the needs of their "possibles" sacks and bought sparingly of salt, tobacco, sugar, coffee, traps, powder, and ball. They blew the rest on finery for their squaws, white and red, and on alcohol laced with twist-tobacco juice for themselves.

If they hit the settlements—St. Louis or Taos—the saloons rocked with their revels: the playful antics of likkered-up grizzlies; and their buffalo-bull feats with the paid women became a

frontier legend.

If their brief encounter with the fleshpots took place at some trader's rendezvous beneath the shining mountains, they swilled the contents of his kegs of alcohol—kegs cunningly carved to fit the contours of a pack saddle. Their wenchery among the lodges of the "friendlies"—Snakes, Nez Perces, and Utes—was so open, so repeated, so forceful, and so productive that a chief once naively asked a trader if there were no women in the land whence these men came.

They shot tin cups of whisky off one another's heads with their Hawken rifles, and if their aim was poor somebody was just short one drink—permanently. They fought each other after the Spanish fashion with the broad-bladed Green River knives—tied together with a sash until the better man cut himself loose from above his dead opponent. They carried their grudges over from the towns or the rendezvous into the wilds, and they knew the trick of wrapping your enemy in a green hide and letting the sun shrink it, to kill and coffin him simultaneously.

Yet there were men of temperate habits among them: outstanding men by any standard of deed and conduct. There were sprigs of European nobility around their campfires, and scions of the finest families of the New World. There were runaway apprentices and backsliding ministers; men jilted in love and men who had been too successful; fugitives from the crude justice of the frontier and from the growing complexities of the East. All had one thing in common—they could warm their hearts only in the wilderness.

They were Spanish, French, Indian, Negro, and all intermixtures of these strains: Vasquez and Juan Loretto; Robidoux, Provost, and Lajeunesse; Tom Hill, the Delaware, and Spybuck, the Shawnee; Jim Beckwourth, the mulatto, and Edward Rose, half-Negro, half-Cherokee, who became Five Scalps, war chief of the Crows. Mostly, however, they were Americans of the Kentucky and Virginia stock who were never happy unless they were moving ahead of their fellows—ever West.

From this stock came the Thirty-Third-Degree Masters of the Craft: the seven Sublettes, John Gant, Drips and Jim Clyman, Black Harris ("a free and easy kind of soul, especially with a belly full"), Joe Walker, Old Bill Williams, Ewing Young, Hugh Glass, Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Caleb Greenwood, Tom Fitzpatrick, Long Hatcher, Rube Herring, and a host of others unhonored and unsung.

They wore their hair long, defying their enemies to raise it. They dressed in buckskins, smoke-blackened and shiny with grease and blood—in the mountains you wiped hand or knife where most convenient. Their leggings were fringed with their dead enemies' hair, if they had "gone Injun" enough to make the brag openly. Many of them were illiterate, most of them were distinctively profane, and their death rate was close to seventy per cent—"Injuns and beaver go together!" During the twenty-five-year heyday of the fur trade there were less than a thousand of them, all told. They were the mountain men—and they would have made damn good Marines!

Masters of the wilderness, they "took the hair off'n" beaver and Blackfoot with equal skill and equal relish. They shoved the American frontier across the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean, and they held it there with the steel jaws

of their beaver traps, against all odds.

Not the least of these odds was the Hudson's Bay Company. Even among that English breed of freebooters who forged an empire out of seamanship, daring, and a nose for the niceties of compound interest, the Governor and Company of Adventurers of England —alias the Hudson's Bay Company— were *savvy hombres:* they hired so many Scotchmen!

The men who ruled the trading-posts and dispensed the high, low, and middle justice, who commanded the fur brigades that took the beaver where they found them, were Scots. These field officers of the HBC, men like MacKenzie and McDougall, Ross and McLoughlin, Wark, McLeod, and Peter Skene Ogden, had a reputation for "keeping the Sabbath—and everything else!" That this "everything else" did not include a large part of the present-day United States that lies west of the Rockies was due in no small measure to the mountain men—the free trappers of the American fur trade.

The prize for which they fought, as they trapped the beaver that filled the traders' purses and made tall hats for the dandies of the towns stretched from the northern line of California eastward to the Rockies, thence a wavering line north along the spine of the Continental Divide until it intersected the forty-ninth parallel of north latitude. Oregon, Washington, and Idaho fall within this area; add to these the northern parts of Nevada and Utah and the western parts of Montana and Wyoming.

It was a prize worth fighting for; it held the richest beaver streams ever known. It was the disputed land known as the Oregon Country, held under joint occupancy by the United States and England for over thirty years of diplomatic double-talk; and the "cold war" of diplomacy had its violent counterpart when the mountain men and the men of the HBC flushed one another along the beaver streams.

The HBC and the wily Scots who made it pay were as much a part of England's politics as of her commerce. Many years before the mountain men came on the scene of Western history, King Charles II had listened to the tales told by Pierre Radisson as the monarch's many mistresses eyed the soft, shimmering luxury of the furs Radisson so artfully displayed before the Court. The king and the tough-minded, cold-eyed men who served England, seeing in those furs a lever that could pry France out of the New World, formed, under royal charter, the Hudson's Bay Company; and in due time France lost Canada.

When Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory, the HBC held the tribes west of Lake Superior in thrall to their trade. In the war of 1812, it was Dickson, the English fur trader, who incited the Minnesota Sioux against the Americans—and it was Manuel Lisa, forerunner of all mountain men, who checkmated Dickson's schemes.

The HBC were first and foremost in the disputed land under joint occupancy, but the mountain men made those lands American. They discovered in South Pass the gateway to that country, and explored it from Rockies to Pacific. They held it against Indians and HBC until it could be settled by Americans, and they guided the emigrants who claimed the lands they had explored and held.

When the silk "stovepipe" replaced the "tall beaver" as the peak of mascu-

line fashion and the beaver trade played out, the mountain men—those that were still alive—took the explorers and the missionaries, Fremont and Kearny, Marcus Whitman and Father de Smet, and *showed* them the country in safety. When the white-topped emigrant wagons rolled west, it was the mountain men who guided them and made their trail easy.

It is such contributions to the westward march as these for which the mountain men should be remembered, rather than their epic antics when likkered up or their disregard for the moral conventions of a house-dwelling society. Far removed from the cloistered offices, the plush comforts, and the hypocrisies of trade and government, they took the beaver and the fox, the fisher, lynx, and marten—and took and held the Oregon Country.

They toiled long for little; they lived on the raw, red edge of danger all their days; they died violent deaths as a matter of course; and, when they could, they played as violently as they died. If they lived too long, until their joints stiffened and their eyesight failed and civilization overran their camp sites, they eked out their days in meager poverty, trapped as securely as the beaver they once had taken, dreaming of the mountains where they could take a breath of air that hadn't already been used.

They wrought greater than they knew, and they left their names on our land—Bill Williams Peak and Jackson's Hole, Beckwourth Pass and Carson River—and an honorable time shall elapse before they are erased. They were the first to go West—

Wagh!

WITH HIS BOOTS ON

BEN THOMPSON, gambler and all-around badman, met his death in a crowded honky-tonk in San Antonio in a blazing gun fight witnessed by scores of people—but full agreement as to the details of the battle has never been reached.

Thompson and a friend named Fisher had come to town to see a play, and after the performance they repaired to a place called the *Vaudeville*. Jack Harris, who had formerly run this establishment, had been one of Thompson's gun-victims, and one of Harris's friends was the current manager. Thompson was apparently not looking for trouble, though he often did. He and some friends went to a box from which they could watch the show, but soon started back down to the bar.

Thompson caught sight of a gambler named Foster, who had been a good friend of Harris's, and asked him to have a drink. Foster refused—insult enough for the hot-tempered Thompson, who angrily jabbed his gun into Foster's face. That was the signal for a blazing free-for-all. When the smoke lifted, both Thompson and Fisher lay dead on the floor.

Some have always maintained that it was a well planned ambush—that men were posted upstairs with shotguns and orders to get Thompson. This belief may have been induced by the fact that although Thompson and Fisher were both notorious for their gun-fighting savvy, they went on their last *pasear* without taking a single member of the opposition with them.

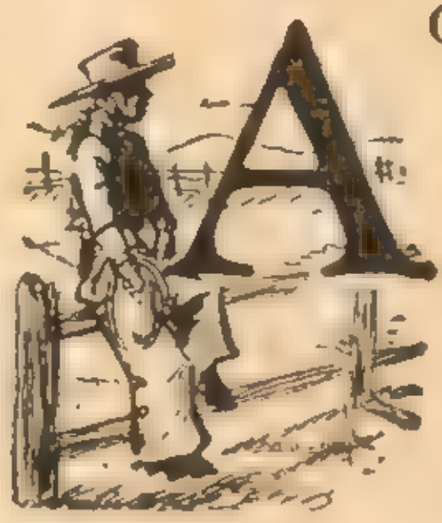
—BOB BEAUGRAND

BLOOD ON THE BUTCHERBLOCK

A Rangeland Mystery Novelette

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

SOONER OR LATER *the smartest of men meets his match—and that goes for rustlers, too. It takes Deputy Sheriff Ed Kane and young Ray Joycoy a little while to solve the mystery of the double killing on the Butcherblock spread, but when they get on the murderer's trail they also unravel as neat a rustling stunt as the West has ever seen. This unusual novelette was first published in* Frontier Stories *in 1927.*



A GROUP of customers in Steve Brandon's hardware store lingered to discuss the fatalities recently reported from Bluestem Valley. It was Saturday, and Trinchera was well filled with rangemen. As usual, Brandon's sturdy little stone building, housing both his own business and the post office, was the hub of gossip. A dozen men were draped around upon his counters and kegs, discussing the

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killing of George Pomeroy and Al Carson.

"It's been writ on the wall fer more'n a year," commented a swarthy, hook-nosed Mashed C cowboy by the name of Bill Boardman. "They was even matched and both dead shots."

"What was the trouble?" asked Larry Jimson, a Dry Creek homesteader who had only been in the country a few months.

Jimson was standing before the square hole in the post-office partition behind which Brandon was getting the mail ready for the morning southbound C. and S.

"Just ordinary cow-range jealousy," explained Steve, as he took a moment to hand Jimson the latter's own accumulated mail, which consisted solely of several issues of the Trinidad *Evening Picketwire*.

"Howdy, folks," spoke a genial newcomer now entering the store. He was a rotund and popular ranchman by the name of Buck Perry, a familiar frequenter of Steve's place because Perry's ranch lay immediately adjacent to the town.

"Hello, Buck," greeted Steve. "Heard about the gunplay down on Bluestem?"

"Ain't heard nothin' else all mornin'," responded Perry, perching his chubby weight upon a counter. "Who do you reckon done it?"

Everyone turned toward Buck in surprise. Bill Boardman's answer carried considerable condescension.

"Get wise, Bucko," suggested the Mashed C cowboy; "each of them jaspers done it to the other one. Motive's plumb clear. Why, they tried to shoot it out right here once and Ed Kane stopped 'em."

"That's right, Buck," assented little Steve Brandon. "They've been sore at each other ever since the time Carson bought a tax title to couple of Pomeroy's water holes. Then Pomeroy got the Karlin boys to file inside of Al's north pasture. One thing led to another, and two or three times they've been on the point of shooting it out. They were both hotheads. Thursday was the last day George had to redeem his water holes, and he said right here in this store he was going down to Carson's and call for a showdown. I tried to stop him, but he went off on the prod, ridin' toward Carson's."

"Yep," Bill Boardman took up the account, "and he found Al in his barn. Five reliable witnesses, coming up a hour later, found George and Al dead, each dead-centered in front, plunged forward on the barn floor head to head. Each of their guns had been shot once. Plain case of a even break between two matched killers."

Buck Perry eyed Bill Boardman shrewdly. "Who were these five witnesses?" he asked. "Was you one of 'em yourself, Bill?"

As Buck eyed him, a blood-red flush suffused Boardman's cheeks. There never had been any love lost between Hugh Bantry's Mashed C outfit and Perry's ranch. In a moment Boardman's flush faded into a leer.

"You bet I was one of 'em," he asserted in a bellicose tone. "And your friend Steve here was another. When Pomeroy left the store, Steve rid out and picked up four men: me, one of Al's riders and two of Pomeroy's, and the five of us went hotfoot to stop the fight. Got there a hour late, that's all."

"Where did Steve pick you up, Bill?" asked Perry meaningly.

The Mashed C man's hand flashed to the .45 he carried on his right hip. "Whatta yuh insinuatin', Perry?" he

asked snarlingly.

Steve Brandon, always a peacemaker, was out from behind the partition now with No. 8's mailbag in his hand, and he jumped between the two men.

"Boardman's right, Buck," Steve hastened to say. "I picked him up right here in town and took him out with me."

Brandon's evidence convinced Perry that Boardman was guiltless in this instance, for everyone respected Steve's word. The little hardware man was entirely honest and without guile.

"Nevertheless and notwithstanding," remarked Perry, screwing up his round and ruddy face as he continued to regard Boardman, "I don't believe—"

Suddenly Buck checked his speech. He recalled something Deputy Sheriff Ed Kane had told him privately over the phone from Trinidad the night before. Kane was coming down on this case, and he had cautioned Buck to let the neighborhood believe that the popular explanation of the killings was unreservedly accepted by the sheriff's office.

"It'll give me a freer hand, and make the real killer careless, Buck," had been Kane's last words.

This was after Perry had confided a certain finding of his own to Deputy Kane. In the light of this finding, obviously unknown to this crowd of store loafers, it appeared that the popular theory was entirely incorrect.

Steve Brandon went on, crossing Trinchera's single street to the depot for the purpose of hanging the mail bag for No. 8. Larry Jimson, the Dry Creek homesteader, scanned the headlines of his three copies of the Trinidad *Evening Picketwire* and tossed them on the counter one by one. Buck Perry picked up one of the papers and turned immediately to the inside page to look up the market report. Just below this report was the *Picketwire's* half column of classified ads. By chance Perry's eye fell upon one of these ads. Reading it, again his chubby face puckered and he looked over the paper at Boardman.

The item was listed under *Help Wanted.* Buck read it again. He said nothing about it at the time but resolved to mention it in confidence to Kane. He strolled across the street to wait for No. 8, on which Kane was due to arrive from the county seat.

No. 8 pulled in, discharging three passengers. One was indeed the county's popular and efficient deputy sheriff, Ed Kane; another was Cal Briggs, the coroner. The third was a tall, curly-haired, and sandy-complexioned cowboy dressed for train travel, whom none of the Trinchera crowd had ever seen before. He wore a high, soft-crowned range hat and a town coat. His boots were inside of his trouser legs and his gun holster was almost inside of his coat. Just about two inches of its leathered point was visible below the coat's skirt. His luggage was a blanket roll and a saddle. Anyone would have appraised him for a crack stock hand traveling by train to a new job.

Brandon and Perry, who were on the platform, greeted Kane and Briggs. The four men stood aside for a whispered conference. Steve and Buck had always been trusted allies of the sheriff's office.

No. 8 pulled out. As the near-by puffings of its engine ceased, a comparative quiet was restored about the depot, and a man sidling across the street caught Kane's words: "All right, Steve, you get my idea, don't you?"

Then Kane lowered his voice, for he noticed the sidling approach of Bill Boardman. The deputy liked the Mashed C man no more than did Perry.

"Now, Steve," whispered Kane, "go back to the store and give it out that we accept the theory that Carson and Pomeroy killed each other absolutely. Say that Briggs is driving out to take charge of the bodies, which is true. Say that I am going out to check up Pomeroy's Hayfork cattle and Carson's Butcherblock stuff on a court order for the Picketwire National Bank, which is also true. Both herds are mortgaged to the horns and thus the bank really owns them. Now, Steve, make it appear that we have no suspicion of a third gunman in these killings, so my style won't be cramped. And look out for Bill Boardman, who's gumshoeing over this way to get an earful."

Steve Brandon immediately recrossed to his store to play the part assigned him. Briggs went up the street to see about hiring a rig to go out to Bluestem Valley after the bodies. Left by themselves, Kane turned to Perry.

"Buck, let's you and me go up to the livery barn too," he suggested. "I got to get a saddle horse, and you can spill that yarn again you told me over the phone."

"All right," agreed Perry.

The two were about to follow Briggs when they heard a man's voice speaking a few yards down the platform. Turning, they saw he was not accosting them but old Speeder, the station agent. The speaker was the strange cowboy who had arrived on No. 8.

"Howdy, mister," he addressed Speeder. "Joycoy's my name. Ray Joycoy from up in Huerfano County. Would you mind tellin' me where the Butcherblock layout is?"

Deputy Kane, as he had done several times on the train coming down, again took occasion to size up the stranger. And again his appraisal was favorable, for the man who introduced himself as Ray Joycoy had a face which inspired confidence, was healthy, clear-eyed, and clean-limbed, appearing to Kane as a fellow well worth taking along. A diversion was caused by the fact that his question, addressed to Speeder, was suddenly answered by Bill Boardman of the Mashed C, who had by now reached the platform.

"Butcherblock? Whatcha want to know for?" Indeed, mention of that brand had pricked the interest of both Kane and Perry, too, for the Butcherblock was Carson's ranch, where both Carson and Pomeroy had been killed.

Boardman's question, however, was ill-mannered in the extreme, as it was obviously none of his business why the stranger wanted to learn the location of the Butcherblock. Yet he seemed undisturbed by the impudence; instead he turned smiling eyes upon the Mashed C cowboy.

"What do I want to know for?" he answered affably. "Why, so I can find my way out there. What do you want to know why I want to know for?"

The reply seemed to anger Boardman, whose swarthy face again flushed a dark red. He approached a step near-er the stranger, eying him meanly. Kane and Buck Perry watched from the other end of the platform.

"I don't know as I exactly like yore tone of voice, mister," snarled Boardman, who was now within a pace of Joycoy.

"No?" asked Joycoy, without appearing to resent the insult.

"Nor the color of your hair," added Boardman, pushing his jaw forward a

little and glaring at the stranger.

Joycoy's face widened into one of the most genuinely mirthful smiles Kane had ever seen.

"Oh, I know what's the trouble," the stranger now said more genially than ever, "you're too close to me. What you want to do is to take five-six quick steps backward and lay down on your back. Then roll over coupla times; that'll get your eyes full of dust and you won't be able to see the color of my hair."

The speaker was still smiling pleasantly. Now both of his hands moved with lightning speed. Dropping the saddle and blanket roll which had weighted them, his palms suddenly touched the shoulders of Boardman. He shoved. Boardman took five or six quick steps backward, lay down on his back, and rolled over several times. He came up spitting cinders and grabbing for his gun.

At the first move Deputy Sheriff Kane had leaped forward. He was just in time to snatch Boardman's gun from him. Then he turned to Joycoy.

"Stranger," he said, "I saw this play and you're in the clear, all right. You were asking about the Butcherblock. It's ten mile north on Bluestem Creek."

"Thanks, Sheriff," returned Joycoy, grinning. He picked up his luggage and walked across the street to Steve's store.

Kane kept Boardman's gun to insure the peace, then instructed the Mashed C rowdy to get out of town. Boardman went over to the hitchrack in a killing temper. Kane watched him till he had recrossed the tracks on his horse, riding north toward the Mashed C. The Mashed C, Hugh Bantry's ranch, was forty miles distant in that direction, thirty miles beyond Bluestem Creek, where lay the Butcherblock and the Hayfork.

Kane and Perry then went up to the Trinchera livery barn and found that Briggs had already left in a hired rig for the Butcherblock, for the bodies of Pomeroy and Carson. Finding the livery office empty, the deputy led Perry in there for a conference.

"Spill that story again you told me over the phone," said Kane, easing his two hundred pounds of bone and muscle into an arm chair and lighting a cigarette.

"It's like this," explained Perry: "Everyone thinks George and Al killed each other, but I know better. They made up just a coupla hours before they died. To be sure, Pomeroy, just as Steve says, left town on the prod and gunnin' fer Carson. But my place was right on his way to the Butcherblock, and Carson happened to be with me in my corrals dickerin' on a bull trade. Pomeroy come up, and there might have been a fight right there but I jumped in between 'em, startin' some peace talk. I allers did git along purty well with both of 'em, and I managed to cool 'em down considerable. I made each name his grievance, and it turned out that, outside of the natural range jealousy between two ranches which interlock on the same creek, the only real sore thumbs that stuck out was Carson's purchase of a tax title to some Hayfork water holes, and Pomeroy's spotting a coupla homesteaders in a Butcherblock pasture.

" 'Why don't you redeem them tax titles?' says I to George. 'I'm broke for cash,' says George, 'and in up to my neck with the Picketwire National.' 'Rather than see you gun each other,' says I, 'I'll lend you the money myself, George, to redeem them titles, pro-

vided you'll make those Karlin boys relinquish them claims in the Butcherblock pasture.' That seemed to clear up everything. It only took four hundred dollars to redeem the tax titles; I had it on me and lent it to Pomeroy, who passed it to Carson and took a receipt. They rode off toward the Butcherblock to celebrate the armistice over some choke-cherry wine Carson's daughter, Ellen, made, as friendly as a pair of Mexican horse thieves."

"So it don't seem logical they'd kill each other a hour later," commented Kane.

"Not a little bit," agreed Perry. "When I heard about 'em bein' found dead in the Butcherblock barn, I went over there and looked around for sign. And here's what I find. I find proof that they were standin' *shoulder to shoulder*, and facin' the same way, when they were shot. The bullets were forty-fives, fired at close range, and went clean through their heads. Here's what I figger happened: they got to the Butcherblock corral and unsaddled. The barn opens on the corral, and they packed their saddles up through the barn aisle to the saddle rack in front. Anyway both saddles were there; Pomeroy would have left his on his horse if he'd only been goin' in for a drink of wine, so likely Carson had persuaded him to stay for supper. Pomeroy, having no family, never got a chance very often to eat a white woman's grub, whereas Ellen Carson's a fine cook, and likely Al was figgerin' on givin' George a treat."

"Yes, and she's just a kid, too," commented Kane.

"Point is," went on Buck Perry, "it looks like they was still friends when they got to the Butcherblock, or George wouldn't have unsaddled his braunk. But they hadn't no more'n hung their saddles on the rack when a common enemy cracked down on 'em and killed 'em both."

"You say you dug the slugs out of the saddle rack, Buck?"

"Yeh; after drillin' George and Al they embedded themselves in the rack, not three feet apart. Here they are," said Perry, displaying two battered chunks of lead.

The deputy turned them over in his hand. "Maybe they'd been fired into the rack a long time ago," he suggested.

"Impossible," returned Perry, "because one of the slugs went through the flap of Pomeroy's saddle, which he'd just hung on the rack. The hole in the flap fitted the hole in the rack. But that's not all. Now it seems none of the Butcherblock outfit was around, and the first fellers to find the bodies was Steve Brandon and his four pick-up witnesses. These pick-ups has all got a clear bill, because one was Bill Boardman, who Steve brought plumb from town; other three were one Butcherblock and two Hayfork cowboys that Steve found miles away stapling the line fence. The five men found the bodies plunged forward head to head like they'd gunned each other simultaneous. Easy enough fer the killer to have spotted 'em that way. Steve and his crowd didn't notice the bullet holes in the rack. Neither, not knowin' he ever had it, did they notice the four hundred dollars was gone from Carson's pocket."

"Ah!" exclaimed Kane. "The four hundred dollars you had just seen Carson pocket was gone, was it? That absolutely proves the presence of a third man, and gives us a motive—robbery."

"No," disagreed Perry. "I don't think the motive was robbery. The killer just

happened to find the money on Al and he glommed it. There's some other motive cached in the woodpile, Ed, and your job's to find it."

The deputy rubbed his big square jaw in puzzlement. "From your evidence I admit the presence of a third man, Buck, but who was he? And why should anyone want to gun both these Bluestem Valley ranchers?"

"Both the Hayfork and Butcherblock have plenty of hell-bendin' gunmen on their pay rolls," suggested Perry. "I wouldn't trust Jess Bedford of the Butcherblock, or Gault of the Hayfork, or some others I could name, as far as I could throw a heifer by the tail."

"You think a sorehead hand might have done it, eh? Well, such a guy might shoot his boss, but not his boss and his boss's neighbor both. Come again, Buck."

"Well," responded Perry, "suppose it was some gazabo who'd done them both dirt, and was safe as long as they was enemies and didn't compare notes. Suddenly he sees they're friends again, are about to compare notes and expose him, so he beans 'em while the beanin's good. Then fixed it to look like they'd beaned each other."

"Well," said Kane, "naturally every Hayfork hand and every Butcherblock, except the three men found by Steve patching fence several miles away at the time of the shooting, will come under suspicion. And as you say, Buck, there's some tough hombres on both outfits. I'll have to confide in the coroner, but I'll get him to either delay his verdict or keep it secret for a while. We want everyone to think we accept the man-to-man, even-break theory, which may make the killer careless."

"What's your first move?" asked Perry.

"I've got orders to go out and take charge of both the Butcherblock and Hayfork herds, to protect the common creditor, the Picketwire National Bank. That's fine, for it gives me an excuse for hanging around. Actually I can only take personal charge of one herd, so I'll need a trustworthy assistant to take charge of the other. I don't suppose you could do it, Buck, havin' your own ranch to look after. Who would you suggest?"

"No," said Buck, "I'm too busy to handle a thing like that, as you say. What about Hugh Bantry, of the Mashed C? He hangs around the Butcherblock half the time anyway, sparkin' Miss Ellen."

Kane frowned. "I never did like Bantry much," he said. "No, I believe I'd rather not have him hornin' in. I understand he was a close friend of both Carson and Pomeroy, and I know Carson favored his suit to Ellen, and all that, but there's something about Bantry that don't make a hit with me at all. Let's pass him up."

"The next logical pick would be one of the regular Bluestem Valley cowboys," said Perry. "He'd know the cattle."

"You forget that practically all the Butcherblock and Hayfork hands are under suspicion," reminded Ed.

Perry suddenly slapped both chubby thighs with his palms. "Yes," he exclaimed, "and I forgot something else, Ed. Take a squint at this." He took from his pocket the copy of a Trinidad *Evening Picketwire* which Larry Jimson had cast aside in Steve's store, pointing out to Kane a certain classified advertisement.

Kane read: *Wanted—an A No. 1 stock foreman. Must know all about cows, horses, men, guns, ropes, rus-*

tlers—and be able to prove it with certified reference. None others need apply. See Al Carson, Butcherblock Ranch, Trinchera, Colorado.

"Wow!" was Kane's comment. "What issue was this in, Buck?"

"Wednesday's," answered Perry. "Carson must have sent it in about Tuesday. He and Pomeroy were killed Thursday."

"It proves he must have expected trouble with rustlers," said the deputy.

"It proves more'n that," amended Perry. "It proves he was lookin' fer a foreman, although he already had one. It proves he'd either already fired Jess Bedford, or intended to fire him. And it proves he didn't have enough confidence in any one of his other hands to promote him to Bedford's place. There's guys that'd get sore at that, Ed, sore enough to go on the prod. It might even explain these killings."

"One thing's certain," replied Kane. "The Butcherblock needs just what Carson advertised for, new blood in the shape of an A-One top foreman, a scrapper and manhandler, some new fast-fingered gent in a class by himself and above suspicion. If we had him I could use him right now, technically, to act as my assistant, to take nominal charge of the Butcherblock herd while I handle the Hayfork, protecting both bunches for the Picketwire National. Wonder where we could find such a man, Buck?"

Just then a voice spoke from the aisle of the livery barn. Someone had entered and was conversing with the liveryman.

"You say Mr. Carson is dead? Well, in that case I don't see any use in me rentin' a cayuse, then. I was aimin' to ride out and see Carson."

Kane recognized the speaker's voice. It was that of the stranger from Huerfano County, he who had introduced himself to Speeder on the platform as Ray Joycoy. The errand of Joycoy suddenly became reasonably clear to both Kane and Perry.

Throwing the office door open the deputy called, "Come in, Joycoy, if you will. I'd like to have a talk with you."

Joycoy looked around. He grinned as his eyes focused on the brass star on Kane's flannel shirt. "I'm not pinched, am I?" he asked, as he entered the office and took a seat.

For the third time Kane looked Joycoy over, and again he passed the deputy's sharply appraising inspection. Kane saw now that the cowboy had removed his coat, doubtless having rolled it in his blanket roll, that he had tucked his trousers inside of his high-heeled half-boots, had donned spurs, and that the gun holster which hung from his belt was without flap, and exposed the butt of a heavy bone-handled Smith and Wesson.

"Joycoy," said Kane, "my guess is you've come down to see about that ad in the *Picketwire* for a foreman on the Butcherblock."

"That's a plumb correct guess," admitted Joycoy.

"Ever run a big outfit?" asked Kane.

"How big?" countered Joycoy, accepting the makings from Buck Perry.

"Thousand cows, six men—all sore-headed because they didn't get your job—an unknown number of rustlers, and one unidentified jasper who's just shot the boss at the barn door."

"That's a good-sized outfit," admitted the cowboy. "But I've been runnin' a bigger one. Jim McKnight's up near Walsenburg. Know him?"

"McKnight? Sure, he's the biggest cowman on the Cucharas," answered

Kane. "But say, how'd you happen to quit a foreman's job on McKnight's place to come down here?"

"McKnight's my reference, if this Butcherblock job's still open," Joycoy merely said, ignoring the question.

"In a way it's still open," answered Kane. He went on to explain that he needed a man to hold and check the Butcherblock cattle while he, Kane, did the same at the Hayfork. Joycoy might fill the bill, acting as temporary foreman pending the disposition of the Carson stuff. "But I'll give McKnight a ring on the long distance if you don't mind, Joycoy," the deputy added. "You look good to me, but I've got to make sure."

"Want you to," agreed Joycoy.

There was a telephone on the office table. Kane gave two longs and a short and got the Trinidad operator, asking her to connect him with Walsenburg, county seat of the next county north. Luckily the veteran ranchman, McKnight, was easily reached, and Kane soon heard his gruff voice over the wire. He proceeded to make inquiries about the character and abilities of Ray Joycoy.

From Kane's long silence at his own end of the line it seemed that McKnight had a good deal to say about the cowboy.

"You mean he's the bird who cleaned out the Greenhorn gang single-handed?" Perry heard the deputy ask, finally.

A lengthy interval during which the wire buzzed information from McKnight.

"Oh, and so that's why he quit you and come foggin' down here! Well, I don't blame him much. Ellen's a mighty fine girl. This sure is goin' to be tough on her, McKnight. The Butcherblock stuff's mortgaged to the horns and she won't have a thing, likely."

Buck Perry noticed that Joycoy's neck and ears became suddenly red. He recalled now that his neighbor's daughter, Ellen Carson, had spent much of the recent winter on a visit to a school friend in Walsenburg. He deduced that Joycoy must have met her there, seen the ad which indicated that her father was having trouble with rustlers, and quit a good job to come down.

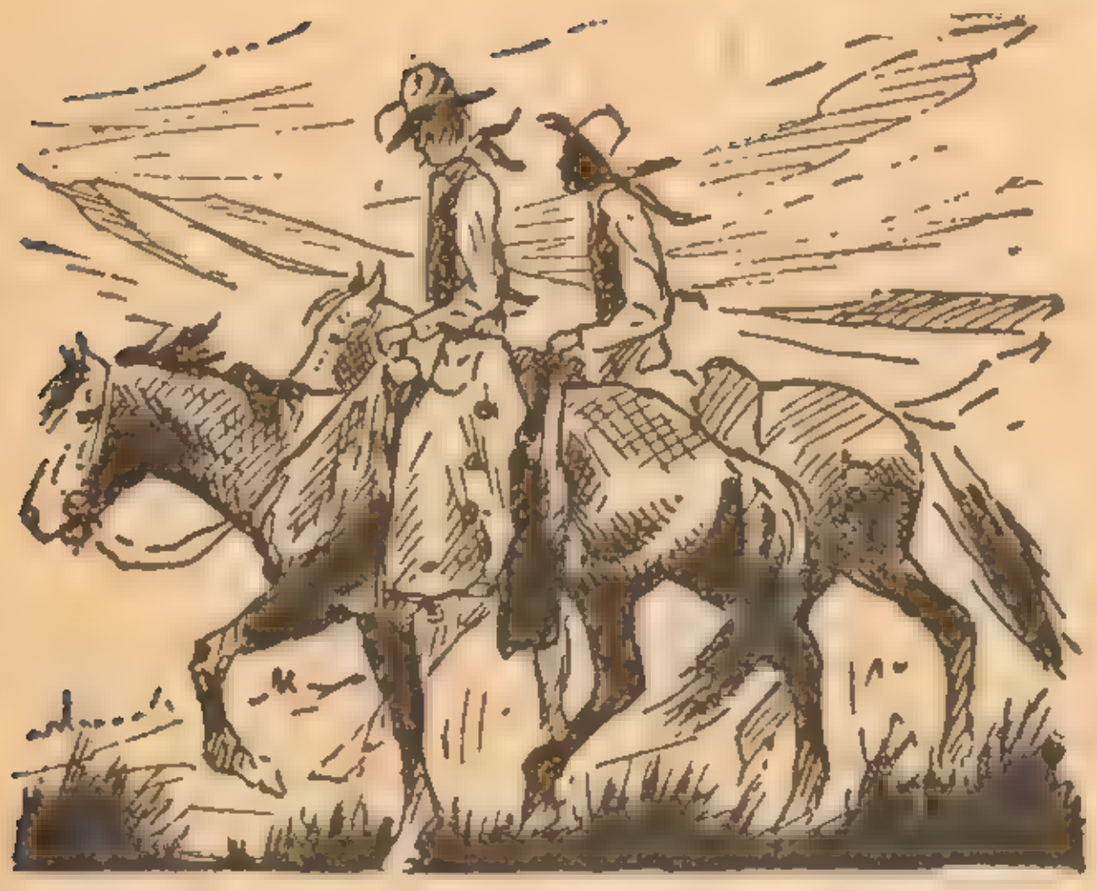
"I'm goin' to use this fella, McKnight," Kane was saying over the phone. "He can call himself foreman of the Butcherblock, though actually he'll just be my personal representative there while I check the Hayfork stuff. Both ranches are in exactly the same fix. Much obliged."

When Kane turned around, Joycoy was still red to the ears. The deputy grinned understandingly.

"You're on," he said. "And it don't hurt your case any that you're a friend of Ellen Carson's. Fact is you ought to have been here coupla months ago. Hugh Bantry's been hangin' around that quarter mighty regular, they tell me, and Bantry always had a big drag with her old man. But come, Joycoy, get you a braunk and let's ride for the Butcherblock."

Perry took leave of them, having business on his own ranch. Kane and Joycoy rode north toward Bluestem Valley. Joycoy, new to the country, took in the topography of the land with interest.

Riding north, they were leaving the chain of mesas which lie along the Colorado-New Mexico line behind them. Ahead was a treeless plains country, unbroken except for the brakes of the Picketwire River far to the north. To the north, west, and east, were no hills,



except that one single lone mesa arose out of the prairie forty miles away in the latter direction.

"That's the Mesa Mayo," said Kane, pointing east. "This here land we're crossin' now is Buck Perry's. In ten miles we get to Bluestem Creek, which is controlled entirely by the Hayfork and Butcherblock. We stop there. Hugh Bantry's place, the Mashed C, is on the barrens thirty miles further north. If you went on beyond Bantry's you'd hit the Santa Fe Railroad at about Thatcher."

Joycoy allowed these facts to register in his mind, and in a little over an hour they came to Bluestem Valley. A wild plum creek centered this, fringed by meadows of high bluestem grass. On the near side of the valley were the buildings of the Butcherblock. Across the valley and a few miles down it were those of the Hayfork.

"The two ranches interlock," explained Kane. "Hello—that looks like the Butcherblock cattle all rounded up in the horse pasture. I wonder if the bank phoned Jess Bedford, the foreman, to have them up for a tally."

Indeed, a large herd of cattle was to be seen directly in their path, in what could not have been over a four-hundred-acre pasture. Kane and Joycoy rode by them, Joycoy noting that they were fat and in good shape. They were white-faced, dehorned natives.

Reaching the ranch buildings, Joycoy noted that they were all roomy adobe structures well shaded with box elders. With Kane he approached the main residence, and saw on the veranda a girl dressed in black, conversing with an extremely personable man of perhaps thirty years of age. The latter was carefully dressed in a well-fitting town suit, wore a tiny English mustache and a creased felt hat with a black band around it. This and his solemn demeanor seemed to indicate that he was a friend of the Carson family.

The coroner's rig was tied outside, indicating that Briggs had arrived and was within.

Ellen Carson saw Kane and Joycoy almost as soon as they saw her. She came forward and greeted Kane, then extended a hand to the Huerfano man.

"Why, Ray," she exclaimed. "How did you happen to come down here?"

Joycoy was obviously at a loss for an answer, under the circumstances.

"Ellen, Joycoy's going to help me check over the Butcherblock stuff for the Picketwire National," Kane cut in. "Your dad advertised for a foreman, and Ray applied. We'll just call him foreman."

"But Jess Bedford is—"

"Your father must have had some falling-out with Jess which we don't know about," inserted Kane quickly.

Hugh Bantry was saying nothing, but sizing up Joycoy carefully. Kane knew that Bantry had been Carson's favored suitor to become Ellen's husband. Such things were not to be thought of now, however, with two dead men in the house. Briggs, the coroner, came to the door and brought

home this situation.

"I'm ready to take the bodies into town, Miss Carson," he announced.

"Miss Carson and I'll follow you in the buggy, Briggs," Bantry said quickly. "I'll help you get ready."

The Mashed C man stepped within the house, entering with Briggs a front room where lay the bodies of Carson and Pomeroy.

Joycoy, quite miserable on account of the sorrow of Ellen Carson, twisted his hat. "I'll just go on down to the bunkhouse," he said.

"All right!" Kane agreed. "Keep on diplomatic terms with Bedford and his outfit till I get there." Ray turned down the path. The deputy, not knowing when he would have another moment alone with Ellen asked, "Were you anywhere near when the shooting came off?"

Kane felt a keen sympathy for the ranch girl, whose eyes indicated she had been doing a good deal of crying. Now, in a quiet voice, she answered him.

"No, Mr. Kane. I had ridden out into the pasture to look at a lame colt of mine, and did not return for more than an hour after it happened."

"Steve Brandon and the others were here by then?"

"Yes, they had brought father and Mr. Pomeroy up to the house."

"When did Jess Bedford and the rest of the outfit come in?"

"Not till the regular quitting-time, perhaps six o'clock."

"Wasn't Ching Lu, the cook, around?"

"No, he had gone to Trinchera for groceries."

"You had sent him yourself?"

"No, I think Jess Bedford sent him."

Kane allowed this point to sink in. If Bedford had been in collusion with the killer, naturally he would have seen that the coast was clear for the crime. And yet again how could he have known that Carson and Pomeroy were going to be together, friends once more, by the saddle rack?

"Ellen," the deputy said finally, "would it comfort you any to know that your father was friendly with Pomeroy at the last moment? That a third man committed both crimes?"

The girl caught her breath, staring at Kane. "Oh, yes, indeed!" she cried at last, "I would rather it were that way. How did you know?"

Kane saw that her emotions were at the breaking-point. Also he heard the step of Hugh Bantry just within the corridor. So he decided not to go into any detail.

"Now look here; it was that way, but mustn't be talked about for a while," he said, lowering his voice. "There are reasons, so please say nothing. Now go in and get yourself ready to go to the funeral with Bantry."

Gently he pushed her within the door and she went to her room. Kane himself went in and called Briggs aside. He persuaded Briggs not to make any verdict public which would embarrass Kane's quest for the killer.

It was late afternoon when Briggs drove away with the bodies to catch No. 7 that night for Trinidad. Bantry and Ellen Carson followed in a buggy, the girl brave and staring straight ahead of her as Kane last saw her.

Not until then did Kane go down to the bunk shack to find out how Ray Joycoy was getting along with the six men so suddenly placed under his command. He expected to enter upon a more or less strained situation. Even

if he were innocent, Jess Bedford could hardly be blamed for chagrin at being deposed by a stranger. But it seemed that there had been no friction. Kane found the seven men seating themselves at Ching Lu's supper.

Ray Joycoy, sitting at the table's head, greeted him amiably. "Hello, Sheriff. Come join us. Seymour, get a chair for Mr. Kane."

The cowboy named Seymour—Kane knew him by sight—looked up sharply at Joycoy. Joycoy had turned toward Bedford, his back to Seymour, his manner entirely disarmed of any apparent intent of giving Seymour a domineering command. Yet Kane could see that Seymour was sulking. He seemed to think that Joycoy was rubbing it in. Why couldn't the new foreman have asked the cook to bring a chair? Then the deputy realized that this was just Joycoy's way of nailing to the mast the fact of his own absolute command. Obviously the Huerfano man had shown the ad and declared his own selection as foreman, and now he must make it stick. Nothing is so confusing to a mind debating mutiny as to receive small, informal commands, after which the commander turns away easily as though perfectly assured of obedience. Kane knew this, and applauded Joycoy's act.

"I was just telling Bedford," remarked Joycoy to Kane as the latter seated himself in a chair brought by Seymour, "that there's not the slightest doubt in the world but what Carson and Pomeroy thought each was stealin' the other's stuff. That explains the word 'rustler' in Carson's ad, also their killing each other the day after the ad came out. Both of them were wrong, of course, as Jess says there's not a cow missing on either ranch."

Bedford, a big horse-faced man who was sulking even more than Seymour, said nothing. He consoled himself by eating wolfishly, using knife for spoon, now and then looking broodingly through narrow lids first at Kane, then at Joycoy.

Of the others present, Kane was only acquainted with Tug Mason, who had once worked for Buck Perry and whom the deputy believed to be trustworthy. In any event he was clear of present suspicions, for he was the Butcherblock man that Brandon had picked up with the two Hayforks several miles away on the line fence. Kane was anxious to have a private talk with Mason. He felt sure Mason would tell him anything vital if he knew it. Once or twice during the meal he was aware that Mason's eyes were upon him meaningly, as though trying to convey some information.

The remaining three men proved to bear the cognomens of Losh, Akerman, and "Nebraska." None of them looked good to Kane, especially the man Losh, who had a killer's face and close-set beady eyes. He remembered now that he had seen Losh and Nebraska several times in Trinidad, consorting in an Italian pool hall on Elm Street with Bill Boardman of the Mashed C. Plainly all of them were sore at the accession of a new foreman.

"This was all a surprise to you fellows, was it, Bedford?" Kane asked to make talk.

"Whatta yuh mean, surprise?" mumbled Bedford between mouthfuls of beans.

"I mean this ad of Carson's wanting a new foreman."

Bedford snorted. It was Nebraska, at his left, who answered the question.

"Hit us all like a bolt from the sky,"

asserted Nebraska. "We never dreamed the old man wasn't satisfied with Jess when this gent here walks in today and flashed the ad on us, claimin' you represented the creditors and appointed him to take charge."

"Naw, none of us seen that ad till just now, when Joycoy flashed it on us," the lanky, loose-lipped puncher named Akerman added. "It shore looks to me like the old man wa'n't fair to Jess. Jess has shore rid his shins raw fer the Butcherblock. 'Tain't his fault Carson went broke."

"What makes me sore," blurted Jess Bedford at last, "was Carson's gag about rustlers in that ad. Rustlers! Doggonit, we ain't lost a hoof. From that ad a guy'd think rustlers was stealin' us blind. All our stuff is rounded up in the hoss pasture, Kane. If you come from the bank you know how many head they's supposed to be. And what I mean is the tally'll check."

"Don't doubt it for a minute," cut in Joycoy quickly. "But you know how easy these cowmen get suspicious of each other. Pomeroy and Carson was peeved at each other already, and so each was ready enough to believe the other was rustlin'. By the way, Jess, who's foreman over at the Hayfork?"

"Hank Gault," mumbled Bedford sullenly.

"He tallies out O. K. too, of course," suggested Joycoy.

Again it was the man Nebraska who answered for Bedford. "Yep," inserted Nebraska, licking his lips and looking closely at the cowboy Mason for some reason. "Yep, Gault wasn't any short. We've allers worked good with the Hayforks, and I reckon rustlers knowed better than to come moseyin' into Bluestem Valley."

Kane got the idea that Nebraska was really the leader of the old Butcherblock crowd. Now that he sized the man up he decided that Nebraska was the shrewdest of the lot; anyway he was always answering questions directed at Bedford. A gunman too, of Losh's caliber. Losh and Nebraska each wore crossed belts and two .45 guns. Also they both sat quite a way back from the table, reaching out for their food, never looking at it, always looking at either Kane, Joycoy, or Mason. Yet the deputy was quite sure they wouldn't start anything, as long as he and Joycoy concealed their suspicions.

When supper was over, Kane strolled outside with Joycoy.

"Well, Joycoy, did you find out anything?" Kane asked when they were beyond hearing of the bunk shack.

"Plenty," answered the Huerfano man.

"What?"

"First, I found a marked copy of the *Picketwire*, showing Carson's ad, under the pillow of Bedford's bunk. That pins a lie on Jess, as he claimed he'd never seen the ad."

Kane's eyes widened. "And of course you couldn't call him," he remarked at last, "because that would spoil our game."

"Right. I found out something else, too. Tug Mason is square, and he tried to tell me something. Only had a minute alone with him, when Nebraska come our way and he had to stop. What he said was this: it was Bedford who sent him out on the line fence the day of the killings, although Carson had personally ordered him to rehang the back door of the barn, which had blown off. Looks like Bedford wanted to get Mason out of the way on that particular day. Then I found out Bedford sent Ching Lu to Trinchera, the same morn-

ing Nebraska dropped a hint to Ellen Carson that he'd seen one of her pet colts runnin' lame in the pasture, which caused her to ride out and see. All in all, Bedford and his bunch cleared the deck for murder."

"Incidentally, was the colt really lame?" asked Kane.

"Incidentally it was; it's in the corral now. I looked at it, and if I'm not mistaken the lameness was caused by somebody hitting it across the fore knees with a club."

"Whewee!" exclaimed Kane. "This sure does begin to look like a set-up. But where does Pomeroy come in? How could they predict he was going to show up at the Butcherblock barn with Carson?"

Just then the door of the bunk shack slammed and Tug Mason came out, picking his teeth. He began to stroll casually toward Kane and Joycoy. Then Losh came out hurriedly and caught up with Mason. Mason came by and chatted about the weather with Kane, obviously embarrassed by the presence of Losh, and then went on to the barn. Joycoy noted that Losh kept pretty close to him. Soon Mason returned to the bunk shack, Losh not far behind him. As Losh entered, Ching Lu came out with a milk pail on his arm and headed for the corral.

"Tug's got something on his mind," said Kane. "But act like you don't notice anything. They'll not start anything as long as we don't appear suspicious. Now, Joycoy, where do you figure Pomeroy fits into this killing?"

"Here's my theory," answered Joycoy. "Say the Bedford-Nebraska crowd was stealin' Carson out. They see this *Picketwire* ad and realize he's onto 'em. Knowin' about his feud with Pomeroy, they decide to cold-card him and make it look like Pomeroy done it. They get everybody off the place and lay for Carson in the barn. But by chance Carson comes walkin' up the barn aisle with Pomeroy, friendly, all past differences patched, so the scheme won't work any more—unless they kill 'em both before the new-formed friendship becomes public. In that case everything would fit like a glove, because the two could be left dead, head to head, each with one empty cartridge in his gun. Maybe the gang throwing in with Gault, had been robbing Pomeroy too. Maybe the sight of the two ranchers, friendly and comparing notes on recent experiences, added to the motive."

"You forget one thing," reminded Kane. "Bedford confidently claims that the cow tally on both ranches will check with the books, which means they'll check with certain lists I have in my pocket, furnished by the Picketwire National Bank. This bank caused an accurate tally to be made on March 1st, and has a record of all sales made since. Therefore there is nothing uncertain about the number of adult head of cattle which should bear the Bluestem Valley brands. They ought to check out, as Bedford claims they will. But if there's been any rustling, how could they?"

"Maybe they won't check," suggested Joycoy.

"We'll soon know," said Kane. "Now here are the lists made out by the bank, one for the Butcherblock, one for the Hayfork." The deputy took two memoranda from his pocket and handed one to Joycoy. "I'm going to ride over to the Hayfork now, and stay all night, making my check there tomorrow morning," he went on. "I'll leave the Butcherblock tally to you. That paper shows what stock Carson was

supposed to have."

From the paper he held, Joycoy read:

Butcherblock Tally, Mar. 1st:

3-yr. strs; 364
2-yr. strs; 338
1-yr. strs; 351
Total 1053 head.

Minus following sales since Mar. 1st:

Mar. 4th, 54 3-yr. strs.
Apr. 29th, 66 3-yr. strs., 36 2-yr. strs.
May 23rd, 68 3-yr. strs.
Jun. 30th, 93 3-yr. strs., 32 2-yr. strs.
Total sales, 349 head.

Brought a total of $8,416.88 net, remitted direct by Hoover-Robinson Commission Co., Kansas City, to Picketwire National Bank, Trinidad, Colo., and credited on mortgage.

This should leave 704 head of steers now on Butcherblock Ranch.

Joycoy, being a practical stockman himself, understood the listing. Obviously the Butcherblock was not a breeding-ranch, but a steer ranch. Carson's program had been to acquire steer calves by direct purchase, raise them to the ages of two or three years, and then ship. This would make the herd more easily checked than if it had been composed of breeding-stock, for in that case various calves would have been born since the March 1st tally, and certain calves unweaned and unlisted then would now have been weaned and listable. Also the fact that the Carson herd was all steers made it harder to believe there could have been any rustling. It would be much easier to steal an unbranded calf, than it would be to steal an adult steer, branded with such an unblottable brand as the Butcherblock. Joycoy pocketed the list without comment.

"Hayfork's a he-stuff layout too," Kane said. "I'm going to saddle my braunk and ride over there now. The less I hang around here, the less Bedford will suspect that I'm suspicious."

The two men went to the large adobe barn to get Kane's horse. It was still light. There was a vestibule in the front area of the barn, containing grain box and saddle rack. Kane, removing his saddle from the rack, ran his palm over the surface of wood and felt, some four feet apart, two bullet holes as described by Buck Perry. In a guarded undertone he discussed these bullet holes with Joycoy.

"I noticed 'em this afternoon," remarked Ray. "These bullets couldn't have been fired by two men who were shooting at each other. Look to me like they came from the gun of one man, who might have been crouching in the shadow of the barn door."

Kane took his saddle a few paces down the barn aisle to the stall where his horse was tied, and saddled the animal.

While he was doing so, Joycoy remarked, "These Butcherblock punchers must be kinda careless with their cigarette snipes. There's been a fire in this stall, recent. Somebody come pretty near burnin' the barn down."

Kane, looking, saw that indeed there was evidence of a recent fire in the stall. There were ashes of old spoiled straw around the manger, and the adobe wall above was slightly blackened. No damage had been done, however. The fire had either gone out or been put out before igniting any wood. But the thing gave Kane a new theory.

"Maybe Carson, Pomeroy with him, caught a jasper setting fire to his barn. Caught in the act, maybe this guy shot

them both."

"Don't think so," returned Joycoy. "Because after the ranchers were dead, the other fella could have gone ahead and burned the barn down, destroying the bodies. More likely this fire was accidental."

Kane's horse saddled, he led it on down the barn aisle through the rear door into the corral. Joycoy followed. In the corral they saw that Ching Lu had just finished milking one of the two milch cows and was starting on the second. The milked cow immediately walked into the open rear door of the barn, to seek whatever pickings might be in the mangers. The rear door itself was unhinged, having been blown off by some wind. Kane remembered now that Tug Mason had been assigned the chore of reswinging the door by Carson himself, when Bedford had changed the order, sending Tug out on the line fence.

"Well, I'm ridin' for the Hayfork, Joycoy," said the deputy. "Take care of yourself, and I'll compare tallies with you tomorrow night."

"All right."

"And keep an eye on Bedford."

"Two eyes and one gun," agreed Joycoy. Kane led his horse through the corral gate, mounted, and angled off across Bluestem Valley toward the Hayfork.

In the still Colorado twilight, breezeless, yet cool and peaceful, Joycoy remained for a while where Kane had left him, gazing out across the vegaed levels of the Butcherblock. North, south, east, and west he looked in turn, to study the lay of the country. He saw plains to the north and plains to the west. South and beyond Trinchera, from which he had ridden that day, he saw a chain of high, timbered mesas. East he saw a single, lone mesa, about forty miles distant, silhouetted like a giant, box-shaped butte against the sky.

A study of the horizons told him nothing at the moment. If stock had been stolen from the Butcherblock, he could not guess which point of the compass would be the most likely to hold them now. But one thing he did notice, which seemed to him mysteriously indicative of foul play. He noticed that the grass in the valley immediately around him was high and luscious.

He took from his pocket the memo of the Picketwire National Bank, and read it carefully again. From it he looked out again across the valley. This was a good steer layout, if ever Joycoy had seen one. Acre for acre, it beat old McKnight's ranch up in Huerfano. And from what Kane said, the Hayfork must be just as good, interlocking as it did with the Carson place along the same creek. All in all, it was a range to put tallow on a steer's ribs. Why then this miserable record of sales? Why should 349 head of steers, mostly three-year-olds, shipped and sold through a reputable commission firm like Hoover and Robinson of Kansas City, have brought only $8,416.88?

"Humph!" muttered Ray Joycoy. "That's only about twenty-four dollars a round. No wonder the Butcherblock went broke. If I couldn't put enough fat on a steer to make him beat twenty-four dollars, I wouldn't call my layout the Butcherblock. Now I wonder—"

His musings were suddenly interrupted by the sound of a pistol shot. The report came from the bunk shack, followed by the cries of men.

Ray distinguished one voice, which shouted: "Goshamighty, Tug! Look out there. Whatcha doin'?" Then an-

other: "Get some water, Losh, and a rag; he's hit." Then another, Bedford's: "That won't do him any good, he's blowed the side of his head off."

Already Joycoy was running for the bunk shack. He raced through the barn and across the front lot. Reaching the bunk shack, he burst in upon a gruesome scene, a frame-up, he knew, but one which baffled any speech or action of his own. Tug Mason was dead, the left side of his head fairly blown away. His finger was crooked into the trigger guard of his Colt's, which proved to have been fired once, and Mason himself was slumped in a half-sitting posture on his own bunk.

"He was cleanin' his gun—" began Nebraska, but Joycoy did not even listen to the rest of the atrocious alibi.

Not for a split second did he believe it. Yet what could he do? Here were five men to swear to its truth. Joycoy saw the brass cleaning-rod, the few rags, and the bottle of oil lying near Mason's left hand. It was murder, of course, and Ray felt a hot urge to essay revenge on the murderers himself.

"Poor old Mase!" Nebraska was saying, as he eased the body to a prone position on the bunk.

Joycoy sprang forward himself, for he thought he saw Mason's lips move. "Mason," he cried, "how did you happen to do it?" He was hoping the cowboy might have one breath of life left, with which to accuse his killers. But the hope was futile, Mason was indeed dead.

Joycoy turned coldly around, facing Bedford. Yet he knew that he must keep the suspicion which flamed within him from coloring his words.

"Shot himself accidental, did he, Bedford?"

"Unh-huh," affirmed Bedford, eying Ray closely, and then after a moment glancing shiftily toward Nebraska as if for a cue.

"Sure did," said Nebraska. "He looked into the wrong end of his gun."

"Wonder he didn't hit me," inserted Losh. "I was settin' on the bunk right alongside of him."

"He'd just borrowed my cleanin' outfit," added Akerman.

Seymour's contribution followed: "I tole him he was allatime too doggone careless when he cleaned that there gun."

So they were all in it, thought Joycoy. Five standpat perjurers! What could he, or Kane, or any jury do against a combination like that? The main thing to do just now, however, was to appear unsuspicious. With this in mind, Joycoy walked across the room to the center table and leaned against it.

"Where's Ching Lu?" he asked carelessly.

"Oh, Ching does the milkin'," Nebraska replied. "Likely he's down at the corral."

Joycoy knew this himself. He had asked the question merely to break the tension. Yet his mind continued to ponder the cruelty of this last crime. Much alike it was to the shooting of Pomeroy and Carson. In each case, the deck had been cleared or at least a time chosen when it chanced to be clear, and then a plant made to suggest another theory of death. Joycoy recalled now that all through supper Tug Mason had appeared to have something on his mind, had later edged toward Kane and himself outside, until joined and ushered back into the bunk shack by Losh. After that the gang had merely waited for Kane to ride away before finishing off Mason.

And as surely as Joycoy knew that these suspicions were correct, he knew something else. He knew that he himself was a marked man. This very night something—he could easily guess what—would happen to him. There they were now, bunched around him like vultures, waiting for him to bat one single eyelid of suspicion.

As Joycoy leaned against the table, some three yards from Mason's bunk, he thought the situation over and wondered what he should do. As he did so he felt something wet and warm against the index finger of his left hand. The palm of this hand was resting on the table top at his side. Mechanically he raised it to see what had wet and warmed his fingertip.

On the finger was blood, fresh blood, not his own. Joycoy clenched his hand suddenly so that the others could not see that he saw it. He looked up and around. The eyes of Losh were coldly trained upon him.

Joycoy knew for a fact now that Mason had been framed. Here was Mason's blood in the center of the room, while they claimed he had been sitting on his bunk cleaning a gun. And Losh knew that Joycoy knew, for he had seen Ray looking at his blood-smirched fingertip. Joycoy had a premonition that they were about to gang him in unison.

His back was to no wall. They were all around him. Bedford was nervously hitching at his belt, watching Ray like a hawk. Losh's right hand was hooked like a claw of the same bird. Seymour was directly behind Ray. On the lips of Nebraska was an expression of cruelly evil portent, half grin, half dare.

"Well, this here's too bad but it can't be helped," Joycoy said, striving for a natural voice. He shifted his stance a trifle and turned his head so that Seymour came within his range of vision.

Just then he heard Ching Lu come into the kitchen of the bunk shack. At least the rear kitchen door slammed, presumably caused by the entrance of Ching with his night's milking. Akerman, obviously nervous, jumped two feet at the sound and a gun appeared in his hand. Nebraska laughed harshly.

"Whatsamatter, Ak?" he asked. "That's only Ching, coming in with the milk."

Joycoy's mind worked like a flash. "No, that can't be Ching in the kitchen," he said. "Because there *he* is down there just comin' out of the barn. And who's that with him?" Ray pointed with his finger out the front door of the bunk shack, the door which faced the barn.

An old trick, but the only one Joycoy had in his bag. It worked. All five of the men whirled to take a look out of the door. As they whirled Joycoy jumped out of their enclosing circle, toward Mason's bunk. His left hand snatched the gun with which Mason was purported to have shot himself, his right produced his own.

"Steady and high, fellas," his voice rasped. "I got eleven slugs, and only five men to kill. First man who moves—"

But he had to make his threat good before it was uttered. Nebraska was the first to whip around, drawing as he whirled toward Joycoy. Ray fired, hitting the man in the mouth, the bullet plowing through his head. Falling, Nebraska plunged against Losh, disturbing this man's stance and spoiling his aim. Losh missed Ray by feet. Bedford yelled shrilly as his own gun caught in the holster flap. Joycoy only had to shoot once more, at Akerman.

Akerman's draw was clean, but it did him no good. Joycoy's second slug drilled him between the eyes, he reeled against the wall, dead before he hit the floor. Only the two shots came from Ray's hands, one from his right, one from his left. Through the smoke of them he saw that Bedford, Seymour, and Losh had gone into a funk of buck ague. Three pairs of hands reached shakily upward.

"Which of you killed Mason?" Ray demanded, looking hard at Bedford.

"Nary of us," bawled Bedford. "You done all the killin' what's been done, you dirty—"

"You're lyin', Bedford," cut in Ray. "Like you were when you said you hadn't seen that *Picketwire* ad. You or one of your gang killed Carson and Pomeroy. So you've been rustlin' their steer stuff. Now you killed Mason. I was supposed to be next, but I beat you to it."

A moaning sound of Oriental anguish came from the kitchen, diverting Joycoy from his theme. He had forgotten about the cook.

"Come out, Ching Lu," he called over his shoulder.

A much scared Chinese appeared at the kitchen door. Joycoy assumed that Ching was not in the gang's confidence. Anyway he took a chance on it.

"Ching," he asked the Oriental, "can you ride a horse as far as the Hayfork?"

Ching's head nodded affirmatively as he stared in considerable terror at the three prone forms in the room, two dead and one nearly dead. Nebraska was the struck man who was still living. He lay there coughing blood and cursing somebody— Joycoy thought it was he who was being cursed until a moment later when he caught the name profaned.

"All right," Ray answered Ching Lu. "Jump a braunk and beat it to the Hayfork. Find Ed Kane, the deputy who was here for supper. Tell him there's blood on the Butcherblock, and for him to come a-foggin'. Now get."

Ching got. He appeared all too willing to withdraw from the sanguinary scene. He was soon heard to make an exit through the kitchen's rear door, his steps retreating toward the barn.

Joycoy stepped forward and snatched the gun belts of Bedford, Seymour, and Losh. These he tossed under a bunk. Then he found, hanging from pegs around the walls, various lariats and tie strings. Choosing such of these as were appropriate, he began the job of tying his prisoners, hand and foot. They were too frightened to be dangerous, but Ray took no chances. He forced them to lie flat on their stomachs during the operations, and soon had them helpless.

The lingering twilight was nearly gone, and so Ray lit an oil lamp. In its glare he looked upon the ghastly faces of Mason and Akerman, stone dead, and on the bloody one of Nebraska. The latter was still profanely cursing some one, and now Ray caught the name—Bantry.

"Whatta yuh got against Bantry?" asked Joycoy, dropping to his knees beside Nebraska.

Nebraska's answer was to curse Joycoy. Then he died.

With his three dead and his three prisoners, Ray sat down to await the arrival of Kane. He figured that he should not have long to wait. It was not far to the Hayfork. Receiving Ching's message, Kane should come on the lope. He knew that the deputy would be disappointed because all the original plans of detection were now

spoiled. The scheme had been to appear unsuspicious until some one of the gang might give the plot away.

Plot of some kind there was bound to be, considered Joycoy. First came Carson's reference to rustlers. Second, the bullets side by side in the saddle rack. Third, Bedford's falsehood about not having seen the *Picketwire* ad. Fourth, the killing of Tug Mason. Fifth, the bankruptcy of both of these high-grass ranches at a time when the beef industry as a whole was prosperous.

And was there a sixth point? Where did Bantry, of the Mashed C, come in? Why, with his last breath, had Nebraska cursed Bantry?

Endeavoring to find this out, Ray quizzed his three bound prisoners, Bedford, Losh, and Seymour. But not a word could he get from any of them. At last he gave it up and decided to search for incriminating evidence on their persons.

He frisked the pockets of the dead Akerman, then those of Nebraska, without result. All he found was cartridges, tobacco, and like trifles. He turned to Bedford just in time to see the latter bringing his bound hands to his mouth. A wad of paper passed between Bedford's lips. With one leap Joycoy was upon him and had him by the throat.

He could feel the muscles of Bedford's neck trying to swallow something. Ray squeezed those ligaments unmercifully, until the Butcherblock man gasped and his mouth came open. Joycoy inserted two fingers and clawed out a half-chewed wad, a bit of paper which he instantly knew must be damningly incriminating.

With this salvage in his hand Ray stood up and went to the lamplight. Bedford, prone on his back, cursed him whiningly.

Fortunately the writing had not been chewed long enough to be undecipherable. Joycoy spread the paper out under the lamp and found, as he expected, a hastily written message to Bedford. It was scribbled in pencil, in an indifferently literate hand.

Joycoy read: *Cuidado. Boardman just showed up, claiming he seen Kane and another guy riding for your place. Everything safe if nobody squeals. I canned L and T and you better get rid of M. Chief says they won't be any chance to work the old squeeze again, but everybody sit tight for two three days, then drift to the hangout. If we run now it might look bad. Sit tight till after the tally, then begin to drift.*

The note was unsigned. Its first word, *cuidado*, meaning "look out," indicated that it had been sent for purposes of warning. Joycoy began to see that the gang was a complicated organization. "M," of course, was Mason. Who were "L" and "T"? Doubtless they were two punchers on the ranch from which the note had been sent, not in with the crooks, and hence had been gotten rid of. What was this other ranch?

Joycoy guessed it to be the Hayfork, and that the sender of the note was Gault, Bedford's co-conspirator. Probably the Hayfork punchers had been gutting the Pomeroy herd. Both the Bluestem Valley ranches seemed to be in the same fix. Both had lost money. Yet how? Bedford and Gault both defied a tally. Each had his herd lined up for Kane's inspection. If steers had been stolen how could the herds check?

Hoofs sounded in the night without and soon Kane drew up at the Butcherblock bunk shack. He entered upon

the scene of Joycoy's recent battle. There stood the tall, slim figure of the Huerfano cowboy amid six prone forms.

"Criminy!" exclaimed the deputy. "What did you use, a machine gun?"

"No," answered Ray. "I only fired twice. Three of these jaspers aren't hit. Sorry, Sheriff. It was me or them."

"I don't doubt that," replied the deputy. "But too bad we had to tip our hand. Did you find out anything?"

"A few. Where's Ching?"

"He followed me back, but he was scared to come down here 'cause there might be more shootin'. I told him to go to the main house."

"All right," said Joycoy. "These fellas, what's not dead, are tied up good. Let's go up there ourselves and hold a powwow."

"Sure they're tied up good?"

"Three of 'em are. Three of 'em don't need tyin'."

"Come on, then."

Kane and Joycoy left the bunk shack and made their way toward the main ranch building, the deputy leading his horse. On the porch of the house they found Ching. The door was unlocked. Ed led the way inside and lighted a lamp. Ching immediately retired to the kitchen.

When he was gone Joycoy explained events to the deputy, showing the note which Bedford had tried to swallow.

"Who's Boardman?" asked Joycoy. "My guess is he works for the Hayfork."

"You guess wrong," answered Kane. "Boardman works for the Mashed C, thirty miles north of here and across the Picketwire. He's a bad hombre, all right, but the Mashed C's in the clear. It's owned by Hugh Bantry, who was one of Pomeroy's best friends and who was tryin' mighty hard to marry Ellen Carson. You met him today. He went in with Ellen to the funeral. The point is that this note could not have come from the Mashed C. It's too far north. Boardman saw you and me leave Trinchera this morning, heading here, and he rode not to the Mashed C but to the Hayfork. He wised Gault. Gault sent the message. The initials 'L' and 'T' prove it. The two Hayfork waddies who were working on the line fence with Mason when Carson and Pomeroy were killed were named Lastro and Thompson. Gault fired them both today, telling me it was just to cut down the pay roll, as all the stock was rounded up in a fenced pasture for my check. Gault said he and his other three men would be drifting in a coupla days, just as soon as I checked the herd."

"Wow!" exclaimed Joycoy. "That's what the note says— they're to sit tight till after the tallies and then drift. And you notice Bedford and Gault made exactly the same play. Both got rid of the outsiders, and both dare us to count the cattle and find any missing. Kane, I've a hunch we won't find any missing."

"I'm sure of it," agreed Kane. "Allasame it's a cinch this gang's been coldcarding both Carson and Pomeroy.

Boardman's mixed up in it somewhere because his name's mentioned. By the way, he's the jasper you pushed over this morning on the depot platform. If you ever see him, see him first, Joycoy."

"Sure Bantry has a clear bill?" asked Ray.

"Yes, he was a friend to both Carson and Pomeroy. Carson thought a lot of him, and always called him a good cattleman. Which he must be, because he's always made money away out on those rocky Picketwire Barrens, the poorest range in this country. Me, I never liked Bantry so much. Don't know anything against him except he's stuck on himself, and's got a bunch of range bullies like Boardman punchin' his cows for him. However, Boardman could not possibly have ridden from Trinchera to the Mashed C, forty miles, and got a message back here all between ten in the morning and suppertime. Not only that, Boardman was at the Hayfork all day. He was just leaving as I rode up."

"Kane," said Joycoy, "this fellow Bantry was on Nebraska's mind just before he cashed in. Nebraska was cussin' Bantry all the way from hell to breakfast. How do you figure that?"

"I don't figure it, Joycoy," Kane answered after a moment's thought. "Maybe Nebraska thought Bantry had tipped us off that there was crooked play afoot here at the Butcherblock."

"Another thing," suggested Joycoy. "Where's the motive in all this? Why should these gangs of crooked cowhands want to kill both Carson and Pomeroy?"

"To keep from gettin' caught rustlin'," replied Kane promptly.

"But if the steers check out with the bank lists, how could there have been any rustlin'?"

Kane shook his head. "You've got me stumped, Joycoy," was all he could say.

Ray found a pencil and an old envelope on the table and began drawing brands. He drew a Mashed C. "Is the Hayfork upright or flat?" he then asked Kane.

"Flat and three-pronged."

Ray sketched a Hayfork; then a Butcherblock.

"I reckon that clears Bantry," he said at last. "For his iron, the Mashed C, is the simplest one of the three. It's just one curve. Whereas the other two brands are some complicated, lines and curves. No one could possibly blot either the Hayfork or Butcherblock into the Mashed C."

"That's right," assented Kane. "It couldn't be done."

"But wait a minute," exclaimed Joycoy quickly, as the figures took on a new significance to him. "What about the other way around? Suppose the Hayfork and the Butcherblock were rustlin' Bantry's cattle! That way the brands blot fine. One horizontal line blots the Mashed C into a Hayfork." On his envelope Ray illustrated. "Whereas one curve and three vertical lines blot the Mashed C into a Butcherblock. Like this." Ray illustrated again.

Kane took a look but appeared unconvinced.

"That would explain everything," Joycoy went on. "Boardman, working for Bantry, was in league with crooked cowboys on the two Bluestem Valley ranches. Bantry missed cattle, and confided in his friend and prospective father-in-law, Carson. Carson put in the ad for a rustler-catching foreman, not for himself but for Bantry. That was to keep Bantry's name out of the

ad and fool the rustlers. That's why the gang is so confident we won't find any shortage in the Bluestem Valley herds. The shortage will all be over at Bantry's. Pomeroy and Carson were not in on the steal. The rustlers kept the Hayfork and Butcherblock stuff up to proper count, merely cutting out the stolen excess for themselves. They were protected by the reputable characters of Carson and Pomeroy, and everything looked safe. Then suddenly Pomeroy and Carson, after a long personal enmity, get friendly and are found with their heads together. This happens right after the *Picketwire* ad comes out. Some rustler gets nervous and shoots them both."

During the recital of this theory, Kane continued to appear unconvinced.

"That's a clever idea, Joycoy, but you forget the financial side of this 'mixup,' was his rebuttal. "Remember that both the Hayfork and the Butcherblock have gone broke in the last year or so, in spite of general prosperity in the beef industry. Why should they have gone broke if they had lost no cattle? Especially here in this valley. If Bantry's the gent whose cattle have been rustled, he's the one who ought to be broke. But is he?. No. On the contrary, he's done well. Instead of getting in bad with the Picketwire National, he's in good. In the last year he's paid off all his notes, notwithstanding the fact that he's got one of the sorriest layouts in the country. Those rocky barrens over beyond the Picketwire aren't fit for anything but goats. You can count every rib on Bantry's steers. Yet he's done well. How does that happen if, in addition to his sorry range, rustlers have been working on him?"

Joycoy was broodingly quiet for a while. "What kind of stuff does Bantry run?" he asked at last.

"He-stuff and whitefaced natives," answered Kane.

"Same as the Hayfork and the Butcherblock?"

"Yes, same grade and colors. The big difference is that the Pomeroy and Carson stuff is always hog-fat, while a Mashed C steer generally looks like a rail fence."

"You say these Carson steers are always hog-fat, huh?" asked Joycoy suddenly. "Then how do you explain this, Kane?" He produced the Picketwire National's memo. "How do you account for the fact that on the last four shipments Carson only averaged twenty-four dollars a head on three hundred and forty-nine steers?"

Kane shook his head. "Yeh, I noticed that," he admitted. "The Hayfork record shows about the same thing. But there's nothing phoney about it. All these shipments went to a reputable commission firm in Kansas City, and the checks sent straight to the Picketwire National to apply on the mortgages."

"Considerin' the bum price the steers brought, it looks like the K. C. commission company did the rustlin'," said Ray.

"It sure does," admitted Kane. "But you and I know they didn't."

Suddenly Joycoy's eyes gleamed, as a second theory entered his active brain. "Where did Pomeroy and Carson usually ship from?" he asked. "Trinchera?"

"No. Only when they shipped to Denver did they load at Trinchera. Generally their stuff went to Kansas City, which is not on the C. and S. They drove direct to Thatcher, a town sixty miles north on the main line of the

Santa Fe and a straight shoot into K. C. That saved a change at Trinidad, switching charges and considerable shrinkage. They—"

"Hold on," cut in Joycoy, pouncing more tightly now upon his new theory. "Yes, I can see the advantage of driving direct north to Thatcher. But look here, Kane, that would be a two-day drive, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"Were Pomeroy and Carson in the habit of going personally to market with their cattle?"

"Probably not," answered Kane. "Not with two-three car shipments, anyway. Most likely each sent his foreman and a picked man or two, staying home himself. Why?"

"Then it's all as clear as day," said Joycoy, relaxing in his chair and grinning at Kane. "I nominate Bantry for the rustler."

"Bantry? How come?"

"It figures out slick like axle grease," explained Ray. "Take for instance the first item of the Butcherblock spring sales, as marked on this list: '54 3-year strs.' That's two cars. All right. Bedford and a picked man—Bedford doin' the pickin'—start out for Thatcher with fifty-four prime steers. Where would they get the first night?"

Kane considered a moment. "Oh, about twenty-five or thirty mile," he answered. Then he became alert as he scented what Ray was driving at. "Why, that'd be somewhere around Bantry's place, Joycoy."

"You're whistlin' it would," agreed Ray. "All right, they get to the Mashed C, where they're expected. Why are they expected? Because the go-between, Boardman, has brought the news to Bantry several days in advance, while the beef was being cut out. Bantry, being a hospitable gent, lets the fifty-four fat beauties stay all night in his corral. The next mornin' they pull out—that is, fifty-four white-faced three-year-old steers pull out, branded Butcherblock. But they've lost flesh overnight, Ed. They're skinny, just like fifty-four panels of rail fence. Bantry's got fifty-four of his own bags of bone all branded to double for 'em. Reversin' all known rules of rustlin', he's blotted his brand into the Butcherblock. The next night, just after dark, the proper number of steers arrive at Thatcher, all bearin' the proper brand. The brand inspector's there, havin' been wired by Carson to run up from Trinidad and check the shipment, and he finds everything O. K. He's not interested in fat, only in brands. In his mind he might wonder why Carson was shipping those canners, but it's none of his business, and the stuff goes to K. C. After payin' the freight, those canners average about twenty-four dollars a head."

Kane was staring at Joycoy in amazement. "Do you reckon Bantry could have got away with that?" he exclaimed.

"Why not?" returned Ray. "It's a double-belted cinch he did, not once, but many times, both from the Butcherblock and the Hayfork. He didn't steal cattle, he stole fat. And fat's the only profitable product of the range. You know that as well as I do, Kane. You know a seven-hundred-pound steer brings only a nickel, when a thousand-pounder brings a dime. Thirty-five dollars against one hundred dollars. Every shift Bantry made he stole sixty-five dollars' worth of fat. Time the freight and overhead came out, Carson only had twenty-four dollars left out of his thirty-five, and naturally

went broke. No doubt all the while he was cussin' the railroad company for shrinkin' his cattle by rough handlin' or maybe cussin' the commission company for poor salesmanship.

"And Bantry? Look how slick he was sittin'. Usually a rustler gets trailed, and has to take all kinds of chances. But no one trailed Bantry, because no one missed any stock. The right number of steers was always in the right place. Nothin' was gone but the fat. Bantry had all the time in the world to drive his fat out of the country, to Oklahoma, Texas, or maybe to some out-of-the-way hide-out in Colorado. All the time in the world, for nobody missed any stock. Thus Bantry prospers while his victims go broke. It looks like he's such a shrewd stockman that Carson O. K.'s him for a son-in-law. The blow-up comes when Carson gets suspicious, and puts in the ad for a rustler-catchin' foreman."

"Joycoy," cried Kane, making no effort to suppress an intense excitement, "I believe you're John-Brown right! That theory holds water like a jug. And it explains why Bedford and Gault have both got herds lined up for a tally. They figure no one can suspect them when the count shows not a hoof missin'."

"Where do we go from here?" asked Ray. "Wait for Bantry to show up from the funeral, pinch him, and then raid both Gault and the Mashed C?"

Kane relapsed into a brown study. "No," was his final decision. "That won't do. Because you have already started the fireworks by shooting up the Butcherblock. Our real job is to pin the goods on Bantry, find the place he's been caching his stolen beeves, and maybe get a few of 'em back. That last we ought to do for Miss Carson's sake. She's broke if we don't. Right now we've only got a guess against Bantry, no proof. Let's go back to our original plan, make out like we don't suspect anything, and—"

"Don't suspect anything!" inserted Ray quickly. "How can we do that with the Butcherblock bunk shack full of corpses?"

"No one knows they're there but us," reminded Kane. "Bantry doesn't know it, neither does Gault. Gault was real friendly with me, and didn't see Ching Lu come up with your message. I was outside when Ching rode up. I went back and told Gault I'd forgot to give you the bank's list for a tally tomorrow, and that I'd ride over and give it to you tonight. Now here's what we'll do. I'll hitch up the Butcherblock grain wagon and haul dead and wounded to Buck Perry's. Buck will confide in the coroner, and the two of them must frame it to keep the casualties under cover for a few days. Then Buck'll lend me three-four close-lipped cowboys which I'll send over to you.

"Tomorrow I'll show up back over at the Hayfork, tellin' Gault that Bedford got sore at you for bein' made foreman over him, natural enough. The gang jumped you and was beatin' you up when I came in and stopped the fight. You fired Bedford and crowd, and I threatened to pinch 'em for assault if they didn't clear out of the country. Bedford claimed he aimed to quit anyway soon as the tally was made, and they went. Gault's note shows that that was the plan, and Gault himself aims to quit after I check his stuff. Gault will figure the Bedford crowd have gone to the rustler's hangout, and he'll soon go there himself. Likewise Bantry, and they'll make the final divvy. There's pretty sure to be a few unsold beeves

still there. We'll use our beans to figure out where the place is, and round them up with the goods."

"*Bueno*," agreed Joycoy. "I'll help you get started for Perry's."

The two men spent the next hour loading up the Carson grain wagon with the bodies of Mason, Nebraska, and Akerman, and with the bound prisoners, Losh, Bedford, and Seymour. After which, Kane mounted the seat and drove off through the night toward Perry's.

Joycoy chose to sleep that night in the main ranch house. Next morning he was eating Ching Lu's breakfast prepared there when three cowboys from Buck Perry's rode up. Ray liked their looks. They introduced themselves as Coakley, Patterson, and Bacca. Both of the former were leathery old veterans of the range, whereas Bacca was a slim, olive-cheeked youngster of apparently either Mexican or Italian blood. Joycoy surmised that all three must be entirely trustworthy, else Kane and Perry would never have sent them.

"Ed went direct to the Hayfork," Coakley explained to Joycoy. "He's gonna check the stuff there this morning, and told us to help you do the same here."

"*Bueno*," responded Ray. "We'll get at that job right off. Did Kane tell you what happened here yesterday?"

"Yep," answered Patterson. "He wised us to the whole frame-up, as him and you figger it. We're to act like nothin' was wrong, in case we run onto any Hayforks or Mashed C's. We're jest checkin' them steers fer the Picketwire National and don't suspect nobody."

"That's right," agreed Joycoy, but he grinned as he noted the alert conduct and heavy armament of his trio of assistants.

Each was cross-belted, and on each saddle of the three horses tethered without was a Sharps rifle in scabbard. These punchers might act as if they didn't suspect anyone, but they were obviously prepared to be forced to suspect someone at any moment.

Without wasting any time the four men rode out to the horse pasture to count the Butcherblock steer stuff. The cattle were there, just as Bedford had claimed, and it was not a difficult matter to count them. Every steer was fat, and true-branded.

The method of tally was to drive the bunch through an open gate, two men driving while two counted. For the most part the stuff was easily handled, and strung through the gate without crowding. Only one steer, a yearling, gave the checkers any trouble at all. Something was the matter with this yearling. Ray noted it immediately and mentioned it to Coakley.

As a matter of fact this steer did not go through the gate at all. Unlike that of his mates, his conduct was extremely broncolike. With a peculiarly wild look in his eyes and his tail high, the animal plunged around in a circle, and then jumped the fence thirty feet from the gate, although the gate was wide and invitingly open. Off then went the temperamental yearling on a gallop by his lonesome, coming to a stop a half-mile away among the willows of Bluestem Creek.

"First loco I've seen all season," remarked Coakley.

"I wouldn't think there'd be any loco weed down here in this valley," commented Joycoy.

"They ain't," returned Coakley. "But that yearlin's shore et some some-

where. It sure does stump me."

The bronco yearling did not spoil the tally, for although he jumped the fence they counted him just the same. Joycoy had noted the loco's brand, which was a true and hair-grown Butcherblock.

When the tally was finished its accuracy proved to be amazing. There should have been 704 steers. One of the counters made it 703; the other made it 705. The average was an exact check.

"All right, let's put 'em back in the horse pasture," said Ray.

"Shall we go get that there loco?" asked Patterson.

"No," answered Ray. "We'll put *him* in the corral. I want to show that critter to Ed Kane."

The four riders had no trouble at all throwing the steers back into the horse pasture. But it took them two solid hours to haze the one bronco yearling into the Butcherblock corral. All four mounts were winded by the time this was accomplished. Time and again they got the loco almost up to the corral gate, when the animal dodged back through, paying not the slightest attention to whirling ropes, horses, or men, running over anything in its path, wild-eyed, and all the time continually working its jaws as though it had a bit in its mouth.

Finally, however, they managed to get the yearling in the corral. Once in, it made two futile jumps at the corral fence, then whirled into the rear door of the barn, the wind-blown door itself still being off hinge. Coming up against the front closed door, the animal turned around, kicked three boards off a stall, ran out into the corral again, circled the enclosure, and then went bawlingly back into the barn.

"First range steer I ever see go into a barn," remarked Patterson.

"Aw, a loco'll do anything 'cept climb a tree," answered Coakley. "Want a rope on him, Joycoy?"

"No, leave him alone. I just want to show him to Kane and maybe he can tell me howcome a steer goes loco on a range where there's not any loco weed. Patterson, you go up in the loft and throw some hay down in the mangers so this brute can eat if he's got enough sense to, which I doubt. Bacca, see if the corral tank's full of water."

These chores attended to, Ray instructed Coakley to ride over to the Hayfork to find out the result of the tally over there. As an excuse he could mention to Gault that he was merely sent to report to Kane the result of the Butcherblock check.

"Nothin' to do now but to keep our mouths shut, our eyes open, and our guns loaded," Ray said to Patterson and Bacca, after Coakley had gone. "Hugh Bantry'll pass through here tonight or tomorrow on his way home from the Carson-Pomeroy funeral. He may be curious to know where Bedford and Co. have gone. Maybe he'll say something that'll give us a lead."

The three men took up residence in the bunk shack again, and there Ching Lu prepared supper. They sat up to await the return of Coakley, who appeared about nine o'clock, accompanied by Kane himself.

"Checked out to a gnat's eyebrows," were Kane's first words. "Just like your bunch did."

"We guessed right," commented Joycoy.

"We sure did, but we haven't proved anything yet. Gault said that inasmuch as the Hayfork stuff checked out all right, and inasmuch as the bank was

going to sell the steers for the mortgage right away, he and his boys would resign and be lookin' for a new job if it was all right with me. I agreed, glad to get rid of 'em, 'cause the sooner they quit the sooner they'll bunch up at the hide-out, and that's where we gotta catch 'em."

"You figger on follerin' their sign to the hide-out?" asked Patterson.

"No, they won't leave any sign. They're too slick for that. On the other hand if we make a pinch before we actually catch 'em at the hide-out with the goods, we can't convict. Nothin' to do but use our beans and dope out where this hide-out is. It's a cinch the whole gang, includin' Bantry, will go there for a final split. Joycoy, you've had all the bright ideas so far. Got any more?"

"Bright ideas?" asked Ray, scratching his head. In a moment he added, "Why sure, I got two of 'em."

"Two of 'em?" echoed Kane. "That's two more'n I've got. Shoot."

"First," began Ray, "these two close check-outs make me laugh. Looks like Bantry, Bedford, and Gault overplayed their hands. Don't it strike you that way? They ought to have had both herds about five per cent short and it would have looked a lot better."

The veteran rangeman, Coakley, smashed a left fist into a right, horny palm. "You shore said a jawful, podner," was his abrupt comment. "These here exack tallies is the rawest thing I ever seen. They never was two herds this size what checked out exack on a roundup, onless they was padded careful to make 'em check. Why, even Buck Perry's stuff, close watched and honest handled, is allers around five pussent short. They's stuff yuh never find in the brakes, stuff struck by sidewinders or lightnin', stuff bogged, stuff drowned in the crik, stuff what jest naturally lays down and dies."

"That's right," agreed Patterson. "Looks like these tallies were all framed fer us, and they framed 'em too perfect. Who ever heard of a exack tally on steer stuff?"

"All right," resumed Ray Joycoy, "that's bright idea number one. What does it prove? Why, that the hide-out for rustled beeves is not over fifty miles away, and that they still got a bunch of 'em there."

"How do you figure that?" asked Kane.

"After Pomeroy and Carson were killed, the gang knew the bank would call for a steer check on both ranches. So they round up everything in the horse pastures. There were bound to be a few normal shortages in each herd, but they was so doggoned anxious to kill suspicion that they patched these losses themselves. How? Why, by bringing back a few of the stolen beeves to make the herds tally out. That means they can't be far away."

"Maybe they're on the Mashed C," suggested Patterson.

"No chance," disagreed Ray. "Bantry would be too careful for that. Chances are they've got a holding ranch in some rough country east of here, where they bunch the beeves for disposal. Why east? Because south would be straight back here toward Bluestem Valley, where the stolen stock came from, and they wouldn't risk that. West would be straight toward the county seat, Trinidad, and the sheriff's office. North would be the direction taken by the skinny stuff which they traded for the beeves, and also straight toward Thatcher and other Santa Fe rail towns. But what is there east? Nothin'.

No towns, no ranches, no people to speak of—nothin' but prairie dogs and coyotes till you get to Kansas. All of which brings us to bright idea number two."

Kane was visibly impressed. "Joycoy," he applauded, "you're goin' strong. What's this other brainstorm?"

"It's this," resumed Ray. "Say we admit they musta brought back a few head of the stole stuff to make the tallies exact. Suppose one of these said replacements was loco! What'd that prove, Kane?"

"Loco!" exclaimed the deputy. "That'd prove said critter had been eatin' loco weed, somewhere."

"And did you ever see any loco weed on the plains of southeast Colorado?" asked Ray pointedly.

Kane considered. "No," he replied at last. "Not down on the plains. Never saw any grow under eight thousand feet above sea level. Plenty of it up on the mesas, but—"

"Mesas!" interrupted Ray quickly. "That's right. You called the right word and it's time to come to a full stop. This here loco weed is a plant that just naturally don't grow any place except on or near the top of mountains. No more chance of findin' a piece of it down on the plains than there'd be of findin' a quaken-asp tree. All right, what about the Mesa Mayo? It's about fifty mile east of here, high enough to grow loco, and the only real bump on the sod between here and Kansas. I nominate the top of Mesa Mayo for the rustlers' hangout."

"That's the best hunch you've had yet," exclaimed Kane heartily. "And we'll play it. I was up on Mayo years ago and the loco was thick as fleas on a Mexican dog. We'll—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a horseman pulling up at the door of the bunk shack. In a moment the rider entered, revealing himself as Hugh Bantry.

Bantry was obviously surprised at the absence of the old Butcherblock crowd, and at the presence of the three Perry punchers. A certain familiar greeting which he had expected to give froze upon his lips. However, the Mashed C owner did not lose any of his habitual composure. His shrewd dark eyes flashed over the group, then seemed to ignore everyone but Deputy Sheriff Ed Kane.

"Well, Ed," he said, "poor Carson and Pomeroy are put away now. Don't know when anything ever cut me up like this because those fellas were square shooters and the best friends I ever had. Too bad they had to gun each other. How did their stock check out? O. K.?"

"Yep, they checked out fine, Bantry," returned the deputy. "Were you lookin' for Bedford?"

"Not particular," answered Bantry carelessly, sitting down on a bunk. "Just got in from Trinidad on Number Two and am on my way home. Long ride and thought I might bunk all night here. Did Bedford quit?"

"Yep," replied Kane, "all the old outfit quit, and so did Gault and his boys over at the Hayfork. Can't blame 'em. Nothin' to hold 'em, seein's the cattle tallied out and I've took charge of 'em. Wouldn't be surprised but what some of those punchers rode over your way, Bantry, figurin' they might get a job on the Mashed C. Nebraska mentioned Bantry's name, just before he left, didn't he, Joycoy?"

"Yes," Ray affirmed without batting an eye. "Nebraska was talkin' about Bantry last thing before he went

away." Which was true. With his last breath Nebraska had cursed Bantry.

The Mashed C man became nervous and preoccupied.

"When is Miss Carson coming back?" Kane asked pleasantly. "Or is she?"

Ray Joycoy leaned forward to catch the answer, which was of vital interest to him. He had really come down from Huerfano to see Ellen Carson, and thus far he had seen her but a few minutes, and even then not alone. Would she return to this ranch of sorrowful memories?

"She'll be back tomorrow," Bantry informed; for some reason he directed his answer toward Joycoy, and his eyes narrowed speculatively. He went on, "Steve Brandon's wife is coming too; goin' to stay with Ellen a while."

"Good," remarked Kane. "She'll need someone to cheer her up. Fine girl. You met her when she was on a visit up at McKnight's, didn't you, Joycoy?"

Ray nodded, and Bantry scowled.

"Well, Bantry," Kane continued, "you want to stay all night here, do you? Hop to it. Flop on any bunk you like."

But it seemed that Bantry had changed his mind in the last few minutes. He said he guessed he wouldn't stay the night after all. Leaving the crowd in the bunk shack, he went out and mounted his horse, heading north toward the Mashed C.

"Thirty miles is a long way for a man to start out this time of night, 'less somethin's on his mind," remarked Coakley.

"My remark about Nebraska's mention of him made him nervous," Kane said. "He can't sleep till he finds out about it. He wants to see Gault, and Bedford. The minute he found Bedford wasn't here he lost all thought of staying all night. He'll ride to the Mashed C, on a chance they're there. If they're not he'll look for them somewhere else."

"On the Mesa Mayo," suggested Joycoy.

"That he will," agreed Kane, "and so will we. And we'll get there first of all. Right now we'll start, and ride all night. We better use Butcherblock horses, 'count of a hunch I got. We'll meet that outfit in their own hangout, face to face and gun to gun."

Just at sunset the next day five men rode up a dim trail some forty-five miles east of Bluestem Valley, a steeply ascending trail which led through locust and chinery brush to the rimrock of Mesa Mayo. Four of the five were late of the Hayfork ranch; the fifth was Bill Boardman of the Mashed C.

"Someone's been ahead of us today, up this here trail," growled Boardman to Hank Gault, pointing to sign on the trail. Perforce they were ascending in single file, Boardman in the lead.

"Course they was," assented Gault. "Jess Bedford and his bunch oughter be ahead of us. They fanned out of the Butcherblock afore we quit the Hayfork."

"Maybe Bantry's up there too," suggested the third man in line, a weasel-faced bowleg known as Heine Gilmore.

"Not a chance," said the fourth of the quintet, one Cash Jenks. "Never did see Bantry up there, did you? He leaves all this kinda business to Boardman."

"Wonder Bantry wouldn't be afeared Bill'd double-cross him," remarked the fifth and last man, in a tone which reached only to Jenks, directly ahead of him.

Jenks turned in his saddle to explain:

"Not likely, Jeff. Bantry's got the deadwood on Bill, some way. Plus the Indian sign and everything else. Fellers that know Bantry real good don't double-cross him. He'd just as leave shoot a man's heart out as say howdy. Leastwise that's what Bill says."

"D'yuh reckon he killed them ranchers?" asked Jeff.

"How do we know?" returned Jenks, reaching back to borrow a plug of twist from the other. "All we know he was layin' fer Carson that day and made Bedford git everybody off the place. He—"

"What you fellers ballyhooin' about back there?" demanded Hank Gault, from farther up the line. "Close yore traps about what Bantry done. If he hears yuh been yappin' about it he'll put the Six Dot brand on yuh with hot lead."

For a while the party rode on upward in silence, broken only by the flint pebbles which, dislodged by the shod hoofs, occasionally rolled down the trail. At last they made a final and summit climb, emerging on the rimrock of the mesa.

Ahead were the reaches of Mesa Mayo, a perfect tableland, cloud-high, oval in shape, a mile wide and miles long. Unpeopled at this time and difficult of access, it was an ideal retreat for men of their stripe.

On it the grass was tall. Yonder could be seen fat cattle grazing contentedly. There was a shallow lake in the foreground, spotted black with ducks. Beyond the lake, almost in the center of this high, oval plateau, was a house and corral layout. About the latter were plenteous signs of occupancy.

Around the lake and toward the house the five men rode, now abreast as there was unlimited width of trail. The smoke which arose from the cabin chimney dissipated the last uncertainty in their minds as to whether Bedford, Losh, and the others had arrived before them.

"It oughtn't to take us long to get rid of this stuff," mentioned Gilmore, waving a thumb toward the grazing steers all about them. Some of these steers bore the Butcherblock, and others the Hayfork, brand.

"What we oughter do'd be to keep 'em right here till fall. More weight and better market. No one's lookin' for 'em."

"Nothin' doin'," said Gault. "They's too doggone much loco weed." He indicated certain silver-leafed, plantainlike weeds which shone like frost-coated blades in the setting sun. "I'll bet we got ten-twenty locos already up here. Nobody'll buy a loco. We'll round up and skin out with every hoof."

"That's Jess and his boys at the shack, all right," said Heine Gilmore, who now had noticed that the five horses in the corral bore the Butcherblock brand. It was easy to distinguish that Jess Bedford's roan mare was one of them.

"Hope Jess has some grub cooked up," offered Jenks.

The five men rode directly to the corral gate, where all dismounted and began unsaddling.

"Hi, Jess!" Gilmore hailed the shack. "Got any beans on?"

No answer from the house. But the peaceful smoke emerging from the chimney, together with the five Butcherblock mounts in the corral, was really answer enough.

Saddles off, the newcoming horses were slapped on flanks and turned into the corral. Jenks closed the gate. Each man picked up his heavy stock saddle

and began awkwardly lugging it toward the door of the cabin.

"That's the way I want 'em," Kane whispered to Joycoy inside the cabin. "Let's go, boys."

Abreast, Kane and Joycoy stepped out of the front door, presenting forty-fives at five saddle-weighted men. The muzzle of a Sharps rifle suddenly stuck out of a window; back of its sight was the cold eye of the veteran cowboy Coakley. From the rear of the cabin, coming as silently as Indians around opposite corners of the building, appeared Patterson and Bacca, each with a Sharps at cheek.

Amazed at the apparitions, the five newcomers stood frozen in their boots. All color deserted them as they realized the trap. Not a man of them dropped his saddle. Covered by an equal number, they were ready to call themselves whipped without the burning of a single bullet.

"You're pinched, gents," Kane informed, training his gun steadily on Bill Boardman. "Just hang on to those saddles and yuh won't get into any worse trouble than you're in now."

Coakley, still presenting his rifle, emerged from the shack. "Where'd yuh all leave Bantry?" he asked.

"Never left him no place," mumbled Boardman sullenly.

"What's this all about?" demanded Gault, finding his tongue. "We ain't done nothin'."

"Nothin' but help Bantry rustle all that steer stuff out there," amended Kane, waving his gun toward the grazing cattle.

"No such thing," whined Jenks.

"Tell it to the judge," suggested the deputy. "Patterson, collect their guns. Looks like they don't aim to use 'em."

Patterson stepped forward to collect all opposing armament. Then, just as it appeared the fracas was over without the firing of a single shot, a shot rang out. From a distance it came—a rifle shot from the west, apparently from a slight rough some two hundred yards away. And from a marksman of amazing skill, for the bullet struck Patterson just as he was reaching for Gault's gun. Up flung the arms of the Perry puncher and he reeled, mortally wounded, against Gault, then slipped to the ground.

Bedford's bunch at last! thought Gault. Dropping his saddle, he went for his gun. So did Heine, Jenks, Boardman, and Jeff Sampson. *Crack! Crack! Crack!* The ally in the rough pumped more bullets into the group by the house.

Kane's crowd thought it was Bantry. Kane himself was about to pull trigger on Gault when one of the marksman's slugs hit his forearm, and in the first quick pain of the impact the deputy dropped his gun. Joycoy shot twice, as he had done in the Butcherblock bunk shack, and as there he put two men out of the fight. Heine Gilmore and Jenks went down. They were doubly riddled. for it happened that Coakley and Bacca picked the same targets, thus wasting their lead, which gave Jeff Sampson, Bill Boardman, and Hank Gault time to draw and shoot.

It was close quarters. No contestant at the cabin was ten feet from another, while the distant rifleman's bullets zipped in among them all. It was one of these which did for Sampson, another winged Coakley. Patterson had not moved since falling by the man's first shot. Kane, his bullet-bit right gunless, staggered toward Gault and swung a haymaker with his left fist.

Boardman, bawling profanely for Bedford and his crowd to close in, jumped into a clinch with Joycoy to escape Joycoy's deadly gunwork. It was the young Latin Bacca who finished the fight. This taciturn youth, unhit as yet himself, coolly stepped back into the cabin where he was sheltered from the marksman in the rough; from there he leveled his Sharps in turn at Boardman and Gault, fired twice, and killed each dead with a brain shot. He saved Kane's life, for Kane, using only his left fist, was sparring with an armed gunman. In another second Gault would have blazed a bullet into the deputy's face.

Now Kane and Joycoy sprang backward into the house. Already Bacca was pumping his rifle toward the smoke puffs in the rough, two hundred yards west. Coakley arose weakly to his feet and staggered to shelter himself. His vest was stained from a body wound, but the veteran puncher made it to the house. There he was still able to stand on his feet.

Outside Patterson did not move—the body of a Hayfork man was sprawled over him. Heine Gilmore alone of those without appeared to retain a breath of life. He was crawling toward the door. Ray Joycoy opened it and admitted him.

Then Joycoy, looking west, saw that the firing had ceased from the rough. A horseman spurred out of it, and fled away on a hard gallop. Bacca chased him with four bullets, but missed. Away went the horseman—one man and no more. Not Bantry, not Bedford or Seymour. It was Losh. He alone had somehow appeared on this spot and precipitated a fight which he failed to finish. How had he escaped from Perry? Ray wondered. A moment later Losh disappeared down the rimrock trail and Joycoy never saw him again.

Two days later Ellen Carson was sitting on the porch of the Butcherblock ranch house with a quiet, middle-aged woman, Mrs. Steve Brandon of Trinchera. Hugh Bantry rode up, his clothes neatly pressed and his boots shined, the usual smug confidence written upon his cheek. Under his arm he carried a box of cut flowers for the girl he hoped to wed.

Mrs. Brandon recognized the situation and retired within the house. As she entered, however, she cast one troubled glance over her shoulder at the girl on the porch. She hoped Ellen wouldn't encourage the attentions of Bantry. The older woman knew men.

Alone with Ellen Carson, Bantry plied his suit. The girl quietly and definitely refused him. Yet the man persisted. He was not easily balked. Suppressing the resentment which mounted in his breast, he advanced argument after argument.

"Ellen, your dad wanted you to take me. He knew I'm the best stockman on this range," was his hole card.

"This is a thing I must decide for myself, Hugh," answered Ellen.

A fire of jealousy burned within Bantry. He recalled quite well just when he had begun to lose ground with Ellen Carson. It was when she had returned from a visit to a school friend up near Walsenburg. The McKnight place, Bantry knew. Later a McKnight puncher had appeared at the Butcherblock.

"Anything between you and this fella Joycoy?" Bantry asked viciously.

The girl made no reply, but her cheeks visibly colored.

"You engaged to that fella?" Bantry persisted.

"No-o," the girl answered, but there was an unconvincing lameness to her denial. Then she added, "That is, I think not."

"You think not?" exclaimed Bantry. "Whatta you mean—think not?"

"I don't think he'll ask me again," answered Ellen. She turned her head away and bit her lips as if ashamed of her answer.

"He asked you once?"

"Yes."

"And you turned him down?"

"I told him I must have three months to think it over, that he mustn't see me till then."

"When are the three months up?"

"Today," responded the girl, and Bantry noted that she looked wistfully across the range.

Chagrined to the limit of his self-control, Bantry soon left her. One of the cut flowers had fallen from her lap, and as he turned away the man kicked it viciously with the toe of his boot. Mounting his horse, he rode north toward the Mashed C.

At the ford of Bluestem Creek a half mile on his way he paused in a clump of willows to let his horse drink. It was then, looking off toward the east, that he saw a rider galloping toward the Carson house. Even at the distance he recognized Ray Joycoy.

Joycoy reached the corral, entered the rear gate, and turned his horse loose in the enclosure without unsaddling. As a matter of fact Ray was in a hurry. Far behind he had left Kane and his friends coming along with some three hundred-odd head of salvaged beeves bearing the Butcherblock and Hayfork brands. Ray, recalling that today was exactly three months from the time he had asked a certain important question to a certain important girl, had ridden on ahead to keep a tryst.

He noted that the wind-blown door was still off the rear entrance of the barn. Entering the barn from the corral, Ray traversed the aisle to emerge from the front and approach the house. As he passed one of the stalls he noted that a bovine animal was in there nosing at a manger. At first he assumed it to be a milch cow. Then from the corner of his eye he discerned that it was a yearling steer.

For three days now he had almost forgotten the loco which he had imprisoned in the corral. He reflected that, with plenty of water in the tank and feed in all mangers, the scatter-brained yearling had doubtless fared well enough. Ray made an exit from the front of the barn, reclosing the lower half-door of the entrance to prevent the yearling's escape.

On the porch of the main house he saw Ellen Carson, alone. She arose with a tremulous excitement at his approach.

Bantry, a half-mile away in the willow clump, found it impossible to go on. The hot jealousy which flamed within him impelled him to return and spy upon the meeting of Joycoy with Ellen Carson. Circling to keep the barn between himself and the house, he approached the Butcherblock buildings, knowing he could not be seen.

Tying his horse in the rear of the corral, he climbed the fence and entered the back door of the barn. As he passed up the aisle he, too, noted what he presumed to be a milch cow in a stall. Intent to spy out the front, he paid the animal no attention.

The front door was composed of a bottom half and a top half, swung independently, after the manner of barn

doors. The closed lower half served to pen stock while the open upper half admitted light. Only during storms was the upper half closed. Peeping over the closed lower half, Bantry saw Joycoy sitting on the house porch, his arm around Ellen Carson. He knew it was all over, as far as that part of it was concerned.

Then with a resentment which consumed all discretion Bantry knew something else. He knew he must, and would, kill Joycoy.

How? Not by walking out into the open and shooting him on the porch. There was the girl to witness, even if the cowboy did not beat him to the draw. Also Bantry knew that a second witness, Mrs. Brandon, was in the house, and very likely Ching Lu was in the bunk shack.

The thing to do was to draw Joycoy to the barn, even as he had lured Pomeroy and Carson not so long ago.

Bantry recalled that incident now vividly. The *Picketwire* ad and certain suspiciously standoffish remarks of Carson had determined Bantry to see Carson alone, to find out if he really knew anything, to destroy him if he did, to let well enough alone if he didn't. Bedford had cleared the place of witnesses and Bantry had awaited Carson in the barn.

But Carson had appeared with Pomeroy, suddenly amicable after a long feud. The two had unsaddled in the corral, hung their saddles on the barn rack, and gone up to the house. Bantry, concealed in a stall, had watched them pass, at a loss what to do. Hesitant to tackle them both, he had merely spied on the house as he was spying on Joycoy now.

Carson and Pomeroy had remained within the house a long time, Bantry fretting in the barn. Finally the ranchers had emerged, seating themselves for a chat on the porch, much as Joycoy and the girl were chatting now.

He couldn't hear a thing Joycoy was saying, but on that other occasion Bantry had caught one explosive speech of Pomeroy's.

"The ornery coyote! Yep, I've had the same experience, Al. Sure as you're born, Bantry's been switchin' bone for beef at the Mashed C."

That was all. Then Bantry had known that his only safety lay in destroying them both.

So to lure them to the barn! How? Bantry's own nose had given him the answer. He had smelled smoke. Looking back into the barn, he had seen its source. As he had crouched in a stall, hiding from the ranchers as they had passed up the aisle, he had ditched his cigarette, stomping it out, or trying to, in the soiled litter of the stall floor. The smoke was coming from the stall, so the old litter must have caught. It had made no flame, but much smoke, for the stuff had been moist, stock tromped.

Through the adobe walls of the barn were small foot-square ventilation holes over each manger. Much of the smoke was being drafted out through these holes, and must soon become discernible from the house, creating an illusion that the barn was on fire.

And then—then it had happened. Carson and Pomeroy had seen, had come down to investigate. In one respect Buck Perry's guess had been wrong. Buck had theorized to Kane that the ranchers had been hanging their saddles on the rack when struck by the assassin's bullets. Actually the saddles had been hanging there for nearly an hour. Coming down to in-

vestigate the fire, the ranchers had reached for these saddles, worth ninety dollars each, to toss them to safety, not knowing how bad the fire might be. The only fire they ever saw flamed from the guns of Bantry.

Up on the porch Ellen Carson, her flushed mind occupied till now with more vital matters, suddenly recalled a message left for Joycoy or Kane by Buck Perry. She drew it from a pocket and handed it to Ray. It was sealed. Ray broke the seal and read: *Bedford and Seymour in jail O. K. but Losh escaped. Look out for him.*

Ray pocketed the note without comment. He knew where Losh had gone, but did not explain to Ellen. Sitting there on the porch he had merely told her a few sketchy high points of the frame-up, enough to assure her that she was going to salvage some beeves and that her father was guiltless of killing a neighbor.

The latter fact was a vital comfort to the girl. Still she could hardly be sure, for she knew two things which seemed to contradict Buck Perry's original theory, as Joycoy had just now repeated it to her.

"Ray," she began, hoping that Joycoy could explain these contradictions, "I'm afraid everything was not—just like you think. You say Dad and Mr. Pomeroy were hanging their saddles in the barn, that you know a third man was there because four hundred dollars were gone from Dad's pocket."

"Yes, that was the way it was. Now don't talk about it any more, girl."

"But it couldn't have been that way, Ray. Father and George Pomeroy must have come to the house. There was choke-cherry wine in a locked chest. Only Dad and I had keys. When I came home, two bottles had been emptied, the unwashed glasses were there. Also I opened Dad's private safe. Four hundred dollars in bills had been placed in it since I had left the house. The money is still there."

Ray started; this information was a solar-plexus blow to the theory upon which all his and Kane's findings had been based. Still, there were those bullet holes side by side in the saddle rack.

"It doesn't make any difference whether they went to the house first or not," insisted Joycoy. "There was a third man at the barn all right. Now talk about something else."

His arm still encircled her, and for a considerable interval they talked about —something else. It was Ellen who first saw smoke coming from the barn.

"Why, the barn's on fire, Ray!" she cried.

Ray looked and saw that this indeed appeared to be true. How could the barn have caught fire? he wondered. As far as he knew there was no man on the ranch except himself. And he had not been smoking as he had traversed the barn an hour ago.

His mind reclaimed a tiny morsel of fact. When had he seen straw ashes in the barn? That very thing he had seen in a stall subsequent to the Pomeroy-Carson killings. Who could have been responsible for that fire? And who for this? He had just learned that the ranchmen had been at the house before meeting their doom. Could they have been lured to the barn? Was someone trying to lure him there now?

"Gosh! I musta thrown down a snipe as I came through," he said to Ellen Carson. "I'll go down and stomp it out. You better go in the house and see about supper for Ed Kane and his hun-

gry bunch. See that dust way off in the east? That's those fellas now, all but poor Patterson, comin' with the steers."

Ray didn't want her to suspect that there might be something worse than a cigarette snipe in the barn. The ruse succeeded. Ellen arose and went into the house.

Joycoy immediately walked toward the barn. His stride was careless but his eyes were alert. His right hand rested on the butt of his gun.

He noted that there was not a great deal of smoke coming from the openings of the stable. He saw no flame at all. He knew that the litter found on stall floors is rarely combustible to the point of free fire, though often productive of dense smoke. Such smoke was now beginning to drift through the open top half-door of the barn. Suddenly it thickened, almost obscuring Joycoy's view.

Then he was aware of a mighty racket within: pounding hoofs on the floor, the smash of a stall wall, followed by the scream of a man. A plunging animal crashed into the lower half-door, tried to hurdle it, got its forefeet over, and hung there for a second snorting and bellowing. Ray fired from his hip. His bullet rived the brain of a locoed, smoke-blinded steer, just as the door collapsed. The steer charged ten feet on toward Ray, then crumpled, stone-dead.

In the main house a girl and a woman, hearing the shot, came out to learn its cause. Ching Lu emerged from the bunk shack. Ray yelled for him to get some water pails.

"It was nothing," he then shouted to Ellen, "except I had to shoot a smoke-blinded loco. He was on the prod, and might have hurt somebody. Go on back in the house and leave Ching and me put out this smoke."

Ching was there now with two pails. Filling these at the horse trough, Ray and the Chinese dodged in through the filtering smoke and across the collapsed door. They applied water in a stall where it served good purpose.

The women had re-entered the house. Joycoy was glad they had not seen the body of Bantry, who lay sprawled in the wreck of his own ambush, skull bashed by hurtling hoof. Sacrificed now with this bullock of his own artful thievings, lay Bantry, the blood of the man and the blood of the beast dribbling a final stain upon the sill of the Butcherblock barn.

Free-for-All

IN "The Trail Driver," Zane Grey has given us an unusually colorful and vivid picture of the years when thousands of Texas cattle plodded northward along a score of trails, the hoofs of the great herds pounding highways through the range, the blood of the men who drove them mixing with the dust that those hoofs churned up.

It would be impossible to give a date for the first trail drive in Texas. Trail driving was nothing new to cattlemen; it had been going on long before the Civil War. But then it had been for short hauls, shifting from one range to another. The great northward drives, like those of which our story tells, were in response to the growing beef shortage in the East which had been aggravated by the civil strife of 1861-1865. In the early years of our country's history, the beef supply had been kept on the hoof in most communities' back yards. As the frontier marched west, however, the East became industrialized; food was supplied by Ohio, Indiana, Illinois. Before and during the Civil War came a wave of farming-implement inventions to keep the McCormick reaper company. Many western farmers began to raise wheat to the exclusion of other crops and no longer raised cattle for slaughter.

Down in Texas, meanwhile, Civil War veterans were returning home to find their ranges overstocked with half-wild cattle. Most of America was crying for beef—and in Texas beeves were selling for two or three dollars a head. The Texas ranchers regarded their steers as practically worthless: there was no way to reach the eastern market. Then came electrifying news —shining steel rails were reaching out to span the continent!

As the railroad stretched into the Midwest, a great spontaneous movement grew in Texas. No man conceived the idea of a great trail drive north to meet the railroad—it apparently sprang full-blown into the minds of many. In 1866 several great herds blazed the way. They encountered opposition along the entire route; Indians and weather were only part of their troubles. "Grangers" fought the new development as well as they could, and with reason—Texas cattle were carriers of ticks which spread fever among northern cows.

The trail drivers' heyday lasted for a quarter of a century, the last herd to

be driven north reaching its destination in 1896. By that time it was as cheap to ship cattle all the way by rail as it was to drive them on the hoof. These are the bare facts, the historical skeleton; stories like Zane Grey's give us the living tissue covering the framework.

● It is with considerable pride that the editors of ZGWM present to the magazine's readers the first story chosen for the Zane Grey Western Award (for details of the Award, see page 101 of this issue)—"Jerkline," by James Stevens. Written by a man who knows the freighting business from long experience, "Jerkline" is concerned with an often-overlooked aspect of the Old West. The trappers, scouts, mountain men, and cowboys deserve the praise they have won, but the neglected freighters, too, played a vital role in the winning of the West.

"Jerkline" is a story that rings with authenticity. The opening scene, with the freighters at breakfast, transports the reader immediately into the world of these hard and sinewy men. The stage for the great contest between Blacksnake Baker and King Bolt Jack is skillfully set. Then comes the contest itself; without the use of literary "tricks," the author creates a powerful mood of suspense. The simple, matter-of-fact conclusion is no forced "twist," but the inevitable outcome of a gigantic conflict. The plot is simple but direct and powerful; the here-and-now is forgotten in the magic of Mr. Steven's excellent prose. This is a story that any writer would be proud to have written, any magazine proud to print.

Author James Stevens was born in Iowa and moved to Idaho when still a boy. He has been a mule-skinner, freighter, logger, and soldier in World War I to boot. Out of this varied background have come several volumes of stories, including many Paul Bunyan tales. He got his literary start in the *American Mercury* in 1923; having written to Editor H. L. Mencken and mentioned that he had writing ambitions, Mr. Mencken replied by suggesting that he try an article for the *Mercury*. He did, and Mencken bought it. That was a lucky break not only for James Stevens, but also for thousands of readers to whom his stories have brought much enjoyment.

● S. Omar Barker's name appears once again on our list of contributors, this time with "Corazon Means Heart," a dramatic story that is a prime example of Mr. Barker's ability to turn out "Westerns" with a difference.

● An off-trail short by Giff Cheshire marks this author's return to ZGWM's pages after too long an absence. "Old Cowhands Never Die" is a story with a moral—it reminds us of something that H. G. Wells once wrote, to the effect that the ashes of dead leaders should not be allowed to choke the fires they started.

● Yep, here he is once more—the ever-popular Paintin' Pistoleer, back in an adventure that's one of his funniest to date. Walker A. Tompkins's hero has built up a large and enthusiastic following among ZGWM's readers, to judge from the mail we get. We're sure that numerous requests for more stories of Justin O. Smith are satisfyingly answered by "Go West, Young Woman!"

● In line with ZGWM's policy of bringing outstanding stories of past years to its readers, we reprint this month a solid tale by Allan Vaughan Elston, "Blood on the Butcherblock." Author Elston has been engineer, cattleman,

sailor, and soldier in his busy lifetime —small wonder that his fine action stories have been prime favorites for the past quarter-century!

● Another of W. H. Hutchinson's stirring fact features this month—"They Went West—First!" The title, of course, refers to the rough, tough, ever-ready mountain men. Hutch seems to feel that in some quarters there is a tendency to regard the mountain men's infrequent "recreation periods" as the most notable of their contributions to Western history, and wrote this little piece to put the record straight. The "*Wagh!*" with which he ends it supposedly originated as the Indian's imitation of a grizzly's growl as, filled with blood lust, he closes in for the kill, and was used by the mountain men as an expletive which brought any discussion to a non-arguable close.

● Western-story readers will be grieved to learn of the death, in March of this year, of J. E. Grinstead, editor, writer, and outstanding Texan, whose warmly human stories of the Old West won for him thousands of friends and admirers. He will be sorely missed, but this magazine will do what it can to keep his memory alive by reprinting the best of his many excellent Western tales.

● In the next issue of ZGWM there will be a magazine abridgment of "The Shepherd of Guadaloupe," Zane Grey's tale of treachery and courage and a man's great comeback. In addition there'll be three hard-to-beat new shorts: "Emigrants Are Peaceful Men," Tom W. Blackburn's first appearance in this magazine; "The Coffin Special," a rousing Old West railroad yarn by John E. Kelly; and "Deputy Romeo," a light-hearted item by Joe Hook. Other stories, articles, and features will round out an extra-exciting issue, so be ready to rope and hog-tie it as soon as it shows up on the newsstands!

—THE EDITORS.

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HE FOUND IT IN A MILLRACE

His name was James Wilson Marshall. An average man until you noticed his broad forehead and penetrating eyes, Marshall was a born pioneer, a leader of men. He left his New Jersey home when he was twenty-one and worked his way to Missouri. He homesteaded there for several years, and then once again headed west. He reached California via Oregon, and went to work for John Sutter. It was on the morning of January 24, 1848 that Marshall, inspecting a millrace, noticed some flakes of yellow metal lying on a rock in the water. He picked one up, examined it. Remembering that gold was malleable, he bit the flake, then pounded it thin with a rock. At his camp he had the blacksmith pound it out still more, and then he put it in a kettle in which soap was being made. It came through the tests, and four days later Marshall gave it to Sutter. That flake of gold, worth about fifty cents, was responsible for the great rush of '49. The gold flake now rests in the Smithsonian Institute, and its discoverer lies in a poor man's grave.

Nick Firfires

RED MAN'S LOOKOUT Painted by Nicholas S. Firfires

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